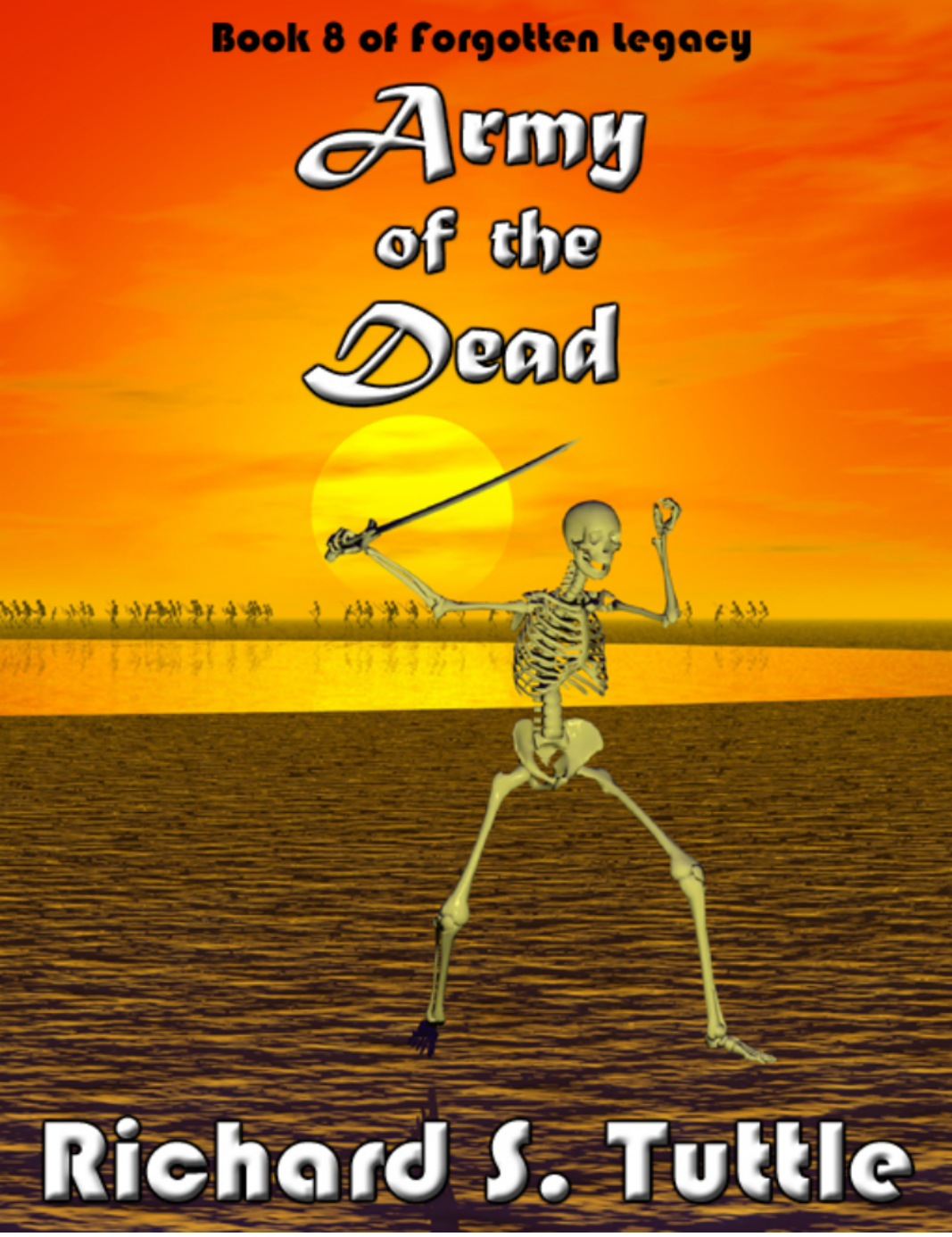
Book 8 of Forgotten Legacy

Army of the Dead



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Army of the Dead

Our story so far…

Young Lord of Khadora is the story of a young soldier who is unhappy with the culture of his country. His superb military skills, and the loyalty of his troops, enable Marak to take the reins of a minor Situ estate when the opportunity arises. When the neighboring lords conspire against Lord Marak, he uses cunning, courage, and unconventional warfare to subdue them. When his own protector, Lord Ridak of the Situ Clan, turns against Lord Marak, the young lord strikes a blow for a new culture. He creates his own clan, the Torak clan, and defies the norms by freeing his slaves. At the end of volume one, Lord Marak secretly controls five small clans on the frontier of Khadora.

Star of Sakova introduces Lyra, a young mage student who is thrust into an unfamiliar world by an attack on her father's magic academy. Running for her life, Lyra enters the dreaded Sakova, expecting death at every turn. Instead, she finds that the god Kaltara has chosen her to lead the Sakovan people. Young Lyra unravels the mystery of the attack on the magic academy and the kidnapping of her father, Master Malafar. During the struggle to save the Sakovan people from extinction, Lord Marak visits and discovers long lost ties between the Sakovans and the people of his Chula father. By the end of volume two of the Forgotten Legacy, Lyra displays magic talents that only Kaltara could have given her. She faces off against the false Katana Alazar and defeats him in a public display that eliminates the threat of war.

Web of Deceit features a young villager from a remote area of Fakara. The story opens with the destruction of Rejji's village and a chance meeting with Mistake, a young elf-like woman. Rejji and Mistake are captured by slavers and sold to a Khadoran estate where they befriend a young Fakaran with the rare ability to speak with animals. Lord Marak frees the trio from slavery as he seeks to learn more about the strange country of Fakara. When the trio returns to Rejji's homeland, they become embroiled in a power struggle between the Jiadin tribe and the rest of the tribesmen, known as the Free Tribes. On a trip to the Sage of the Mountain, Rejji discovers that he is the long-awaited Astor of prophecy. He finds a painting in the ancient lost city of Angragar that depicts Lord Marak, Lyra, and himself. By the end of volume three, Rejji succeeds in uniting the Free Tribes under his banner and defeating the Jiadin. He immediately makes plans to rebuild his native country.

Aakuta: the Dark Mage introduces a new mysterious figure. A powerful dark mage suddenly appears in a country devoid of male

mages. The mage appears to have no allegiances in the growing struggle between Lord Marak and the forces of evil, but he has the habit of always showing up when conflict erupts. Meanwhile, Lord Marak tries to arouse Khadora into stopping an invasion by the Jiadin. Not only do the other lords refuse to help him, but they actively try to ruin him through attacks and assassination attempts. The secret alliances long held by Lord Marak are eventually discovered as Marak first ascends to the Lords' Council and eventually becomes Emperor of Khadora. At the conclusion of volume four, Emperor Marak is consolidating Khadora under his banner. His plan is to rally all of the armies to help him combat the coming invasion of evil.

In *Island of Darkness*, a false Katana again rules Omunga. War is declared on the Sakovans as Vand's people poison the food supply of Omunga. Emperor Marak guides Lyra as she attempts to win the war without inflicting too many casualties. She knows of the coming invasion and is forced to preserve as many of the Omungans as possible. Meanwhile, Mistake and MistyTrail discover that they are sisters. They set out on a sea voyage and are shipwrecked off the Island of Darkness. As they search for a way to get home, the sisters discover elves, which were long thought to be extinct. In their bid for freedom, the sisters must rescue a pair of elves and get them off the island. During the rescues, the women discover many dark secrets of the evil enemy. At the end of volume five, Emperor Marak has ordered his people to deliver Mistake and her new friends to Khadoratung where he hopes to learn more about Vand and the lost nation of elves.

In *Elvangar*, Eltor and Caldal, the young male elves rescued by Mistake and MistyTrail, learn the truth about the ancient relations between the humans and the elves. They witness the awakening of the ancient city of Angragar before escorting Mistake and MistyTrail to the hidden land of Elvangar. Mistake and MistyTrail find that Elvangar is not the utopia that they expected. The land is ruled by a moody queen who turns out to be their mother. Arrested for attempting to assassinate the queen, Mistake and MistyTrail escape from Elvangar and return to the Island of Darkness to rescue their father, Avalar, King of the Elves. The young females elves discover that they are the lost princesses, Alahara and Alastasia, and accompany Avalar back to Elvangar to reclaim his throne.

In *Winged Warrior*, the Torak learns that the dragon Myka is a creature of Kaltara that he is to ride to war against the evil forces of Vand. A rebellion is foiled in Elvangar, and a spy is discovered in the Sakova. A movement by lords in Khadora is squashed and the Khadoran lords are introduced to the Chula tribal leaders to unite the country. In Fakara, Bakhai becomes a shaman while Rejji brings the Jiadin outcasts into the brotherhood of horsemen. Fisher has

discovered how Clarvoy manages to roam the mainland without detection and is hot on his trail. While all of these developments bode well for the followers of Kaltara, the Time of Cleansing has begun with the total destruction of the Sakovan city of Duran. The Motangans have clearly shown that there will be no negotiations to end the war. There will be no prisoners taken by Vand. There will be no mercy given. The Time of Cleansing will be a fight to the death. Either the forces of Kaltara will be successful, or they will be annihilated.

Prologue

Thousands of years ago inside the temple at Vandegar…

"Your people grow, Vand," the Great Demon praised the errant priest of Kaltara. "When Angragar is crushed we shall destroy Kaltara."

Vand gazed around at the violent landscape, a wide smile spreading across his lips. The volcanoes spewed towering columns of smoke as lava flowed freely down their slopes. The ground below the mountains was parched, and long cracks ripped along its surface. Vand found comfort in the wasteland.

"I have already given the word," grinned the disciple of Dobuk. "The people of Vandegar have begun the rites that will result in the fall of Kaltara. Soon you will be the only god to exist. I thought you would want to come and witness our victory."

"No!" shouted Dobuk, his voice blasting through the wilderness.

Instantly the volcanoes burst open sending their molten mass flooding into the valley. The air filled with shards of burning rock, and Vand felt a shiver of fear course through his body.

"Stop it this instant, fool," demanded the Great Demon. "Kaltara has too many followers. Angragar must be destroyed first. Do you not understand anything?"

"I thought you would be most pleased with my initiative," quivered Vand. "We have over a million people preparing for Kaltara's downfall as we speak. How can Angragar stand after Kaltara falls?"

"Kaltara will not fall if Angragar still stands," snarled the demon. "He must be shed of his followers before the rites are issued. Halt the ceremony immediately, or you will suffer. Go!"

The ground shook mightily under the disciple's feet, and Vand fell to the ground. He looked up at Dobuk and saw raw fury in the demon's face. Dobuk's claws rose and pointed threateningly at Vand. The disciple scrambled to his feet and raced out of the room. He slammed the door shut and leaned against the wall in the corridor of the temple at Vandegar. Sweat poured off Vand's body, and his limbs were shaking wildly. A frown of confusion creased his brow as Dobuk's words thundered through his mind.

Pulling himself together, Vand raced through the temple and out onto the roof. He ran to the northern edge of the roof and gazed down at the magnificent city of Vandegar. Over half a million people had gathered in the city to begin the rites to bring about the fall of Kaltara. Vand watched with pride as his people scurried about, but his smile faded quickly as he remembered Dobuk's words. He turned and waved for a soldier to come to him. The man ran towards the disciple

and bowed before him before falling to his knees.

"Go down to the city," ordered Vand. "The rites are to be halted immediately. Spread the word to every quarter. If the rites continue past the hour, I will have you sacrificed. Go."

The soldier swallowed hard and rose erect. He bowed once more and then ran into the temple. Minutes later Vand saw the soldier far below running towards the city. He dismissed the messenger from his mind, and Vand's smile reappeared. His eyes focused on the four tall towers rising up out of the distant city. Each of those towers was the object of a select group of priests conducting the coordinated rites. Vand shook his head in sadness that Dobuk had called off the rites. He still did not understand the need for crushing Angragar before the rites, but he knew better than to defy the Great Demon. Disappointment raged through his body at the thought of his great day being postponed.

Unexpectedly, lightning flashed in the clear blue sky. Vand gazed up at the sky in search of the storm front, but there was not a cloud to be seen. His eyes narrowed suspiciously as he refocused his attention on the distant city. He wondered if the rites were ahead of schedule.

Again the sky flashed brilliantly, and thunder filled the air. Vand looked on in awe as lightning danced in the sky and began to circle over the city. The sky darkened almost instantaneously, and the sun disappeared from view. The bright circle of lightning grew more brilliant and lit the city below it. A tremor of fear raced up Vand's spine as he worried about what was happening. The show in the sky had nothing to do with the rites, but it was obviously a show of power, if not from Dobuk, then it had to be from Kaltara.

In answer to Vand's unspoken question, the circle of lightning suddenly split in quarters, each quarter striking one of the four tall towers. The stone towers exploded in a frenzy of rocks, showering the citizens of Vandegar. The lightning continued downward past the bases of the towers and pierced the ground that the city was built upon. Great geysers of water spouted from the ground where the towers had stood just moments before.

The people of Vandegar panicked, their screams vying with the thunder rolling through the air. Hundreds of thousands of people screamed and started running away from the towers. The ground shook with tremendous cracks snapping through the air. Buildings crumbled and fell to the streets crushing the citizens trying to flee.

Since Vandegar was a coastal city, the panicked hordes ran in every direction except the sea. Their only thought was to get away from the crumbling buildings. Some raced towards the temple, which sat well inland from the city, while others merely ran along the shortest path out of the city. None of them survived.

Vand watched as earthquakes ripped along the city's three edges. Huge cracks widened, and columns of seawater shot thousands of paces into the sky. The fleeing citizens turned from the edges of the city and raced inward, dodging the still crumbling buildings. The entire floor of the city buckled and crumbled as monstrous, towering waves rose up from the sea and crashed down on the city. Within minutes the city was gone. The angry waves of the sea tore at the new shoreline, now much closer to the temple of Vandegar than it had been before. As large chunks of land crumbled into the advancing sea, Vand turned and ran. He shouted orders for his remaining people to gather to him, but the masses that had not been in the city were already running southward, heading as far away from Vandegar as they could get.

Vand snarled in disgust and walked towards the special room in the temple that hosted Dobuk, the Great Demon. He entered the room and found Dobuk in the foulest of moods.

"You have failed me, disciple," snapped Dobuk. "It will be a long time before we can threaten Kaltara again."

"I tried to stop it," explained Vand. "I will gather the remnants of my people and set out for Angragar. We will crush the city and return here."

"No," Dobuk shook his head. "Your people are too few. For now you have failed me. Vandegar is no longer safe to dwell in. Gather your people and take them southward to the coast. There you will build a great fleet of ships to take you into exile. You will not be allowed to return here until the time is right. This will be your punishment."

"Where will we go?" asked Vand.

"Where I tell you to go," snapped Dobuk. "No longer can you be trusted to act without my orders. Go and do as I have commanded."

Chapter 1

Clarvoy's Return

The spymaster entered the throne room of the temple on the Island of Darkness. Emperor Vand stopped in mid-sentence as he saw Clarvoy enter. He noticed the haggard look on the spy's face and saw his left arm hanging limply.

"Everyone out," ordered the Emperor as he waved Clarvoy towards him.

Xavo joined the others in the throne room as they headed out of the chamber. He halted near the doors when he heard the Emperor's voice speak softly in his ear.

"Stay, Xavo," the Emperor whispered through an air tunnel. "Clarvoy may need your healing."

Xavo nodded subconsciously and turned around. He saw the Emperor drop the air tunnel as he approached the throne.

"What happened Clarvoy?" asked the Emperor as the doors at the far end of the throne room closed.

"I was attacked in Meliban," answered the spymaster. "It is only a knife wound and not very serious, but I cannot focus on it myself. I need a healer to look at it."

"See to his needs, Xavo," instructed the Emperor. "Heal him well. Clarvoy is most vital to my plans."

Xavo nodded and approached the spymaster. He cut away the fabric of Clarvoy's tunic and examined the wound. It was a fairly deep cut, but Xavo had seen much worse. He probed the wound, causing Clarvoy's arm to twitch.

"Sorry," apologized Xavo.

"Just heal it," frowned the spymaster. "It has become infected. I will not faint from your efforts."

"It is unlike you to be noticed on the mainland," frowned the Emperor, ignoring Xavo completely. "How did this happen?"

"Perhaps I grow careless," Clarvoy shrugged, causing Xavo to halt his ministrations for a moment. "It is truly nothing serious. I pay no mind to it, and it should not trouble you. There is troublesome news, though."

"Oh?" prompted the Emperor.

"The Jiadin are moving into the Astor's fold," reported the spymaster. "Wyant has agreed to release the Jiadin from the cities in return for their loyalty."

“That will not last long,” laughed Vand. “Do not let it trouble you. The Jiadin are like children. Within days they will be seeking to raid Angragar once more. It is an alliance that cannot possibly hold together.”

“Wyant has agreed to take six of the leaders of the Jiadin to Angragar,” Clarvoy shook his head. “I fear that this time the Jiadin may actually remain loyal to your enemies.”

“He will actually take Jiadin to Angragar?” balked the Emperor. “You must follow them and find out where the lost city is.”

“I would have been one of the six,” frowned Clarvoy, “had it not been for this wound. I would have been discovered if I tried to impersonate one of the six with my arm bleeding as it was.”

“How fortuitous for the Astor?” seethed the Emperor as his eyes narrowed. “Tell me how you became wounded.”

“I was placing a spell on Wyant in his room during the night,” explained Clarvoy. “I heard a noise in the hallway and drew my knife. Within seconds the door opened wide and a Jiadin appeared. He saw me and moved more quickly than I had expected. I cast a blinding spell to destroy his vision, but his throw was most unfortunate. It struck me in the arm. I heard Wyant roll off the bed as the intruder shouted an alarm. I had no choice but to withdraw from the scene. Within minutes the entire city was awake searching for a man with a knife wound in his arm. I could not possibly stay in Meliban without detection, so I fled.”

“Extremely bad luck?” the Emperor asked suspiciously, “or is there more to it?”

“I think there is more to it,” Clarvoy hesitantly admitted. “Wyant’s room was at the end of a corridor. No Jiadin should have been there. Also, I had to maneuver carefully past peanut shells on the floor outside the marshal’s door. I assumed that Wyant had left them to alarm him, but upon reflection I realize that they were placed there by the Jiadin.”

“So the Jiadin were expecting an attack on Wyant?” questioned Vand.

“It would appear so,” nodded Clarvoy as Xavo cast the last of his healing spells, “but it is worse than that. If the Jiadin expected one of their own to assassinate the marshal, they would have posted guards outside the room.”

“So they were expecting an outsider?” mused Vand. “Is there any reason that you think they might have been expecting you?”

Xavo continued casting healing spells on the spymaster’s arm even though the wound was healed. He listened intently to the conversation, knowing who tried to kill Clarvoy and how the assassin had found out about the spymaster’s planned visit to Meliban.

“I had a great deal of time during the voyage back to think about it,” nodded Clarvoy. “I am convinced that my attacker knew who I was. I am also sure that I was expected in Meliban.”

“But who knew where you were going?” inquired the Emperor. “You do not even tell the ship captain your destination until you leave port. How could anyone know for sure where you would turn up?”

“That is it!” exclaimed Clarvoy. “I cannot believe I was so blind. The whole voyage back I tried to imagine who could possibly know my destination, but you just delivered it to me.”

“Explain yourself,” responded the Emperor.

“I never tell the captain our destination until we leave port,” confirmed the spymaster, “but the trip to Meliban was interrupted. You ordered the ship returned to port because of the communication from the inner circle of the Star of Sakova.”

“And you had already informed the captain of the ship of your destination?” asked Vand.

“Exactly,” nodded Clarvoy. “That is the only difference in this trip from thousands of others. I must go interrogate the captain immediately.”

“You will stay here,” the Emperor shook his head as he watched Xavo casting healing magic on the spy’s arm. “I will have the traitorous captain delivered, and we shall learn who on this island he told the destination to.”

Xavo felt an involuntary spasm wrack his body as he feared for Lady Mystic. Xavo knew that the sea captain could not resist the torture that awaited him. He made a show of completing the healing spell as Vand snapped his fingers and shouted a strange name.

“Barrok,” called the Emperor. “Come to me.”

Xavo patted the spy on the arm and nodded to the Emperor as he turned to leave so that he could warn Lady Mystic of the danger awaiting her.

“Stay, Xavo,” commanded the Emperor. “Your skills might be helpful in interrogating the captain.”

Xavo nodded dutifully and then heard a metallic clicking outside the throne room. He turned his head with curiosity towards the door on the side of the throne room. He was not prepared for the sight that unfolded before him.

A huge black creature bowed slightly as it entered the room. It did not bow in deference to the Emperor, but rather to facilitate its entry into the room as the doorway was too short to accommodate its height. The demon’s sharp claws tapped the stone floor as it straightened out and advanced towards the throne. Xavo gazed at the horned beast, its body gleaming in the torchlight like a shiny black metal. Its stride across the room spoke of tremendous power as its

snout opened in a slight grin to reveal rows of sharp pointed teeth. Deep black eyes instantly took in the occupants of the room and discarded them as unworthy opponents. The demon halted before the Emperor and bowed its head slightly.

"Barrok," commanded the Emperor, "I want the sea captain of the ship that arrived this morning. In fact, I want the entire crew of the ship brought here. They are not to be harmed, but you will not allow them to escape. Let nothing get in your way of pleasing me. Go."

The demon grinned broadly and nodded its head. It turned and strode out of the throne room purposefully, its claws sounding as if the stone tiles of the floor would shatter with each step. When the creature was gone, Xavo found himself staring at the empty doorway.

"Impressive isn't he?" grinned Vand. "I have more of them. Some were lost in the destruction of Vandegar so long ago, but six remain. They are sworn to protect me."

Xavo fidgeted openly. He knew that Vand would attribute his unease to seeing the demon, and that was fine with the mage, but his mind was on his lover. If the sea captain were tortured, Vand would learn that Lady Mystic asked about the ship's destination. He would know who the spy was, and that would result in her death.

"Can we be sure that the captain is the spy?" Xavo asked as he turned back to face the Emperor. "Even if he knew the destination of Clarvoy, how could he transmit that information in time to ensure that someone was waiting for Clarvoy?"

"A valid question," nodded the spymaster as he rubbed his healed arm and flexed it. "It would take a mage with the knowledge of the air tunnel to send word to the mainland."

"Were there such mages on your ship?" asked Xavo.

"There is always one on the ship," the spymaster frowned, "but I strive to use mages that I can trust. I am sure of the loyalty of the mage who was present onboard the ship. Why do you ask?"

"Because even if the captain was willing to part with the information regarding your destination," answered Xavo, "he would need the mage to deliver it."

"It could be any mage on this island," retorted Clarvoy. "Once the captain knew that I was headed for Meliban, he could have told someone here. He could even have told you," Clarvoy added accusingly.

"Hardly," smiled Xavo. "I was in this room when you arrived, and when you left. I never left the Emperor's presence during your return to the island. Not only that, I resent your accusation. As you have, I have displayed my loyalty to the Emperor on many occasions. I do not question your loyalty; do not dare to question mine."

"Enough," scowled the Emperor. "I do not suspect Xavo, Clarvoy.

His words are true about your last visit. He never left my presence. Let the captain tell us whom he told. That will finish the issue."

* * *

The crew of the ship heard the shouting and the commotion from the city. They hurried to the rail and gazed towards the temple to see what everyone was shouting about. They saw the large demon marching down the front steps of the temple, its eyes fixed on the ship tied up to the wharf.

"Look at that beast," shouted one of the sailors. "I wouldn't want to get in the way of that. What is it?"

"One of the Emperor's demons," a soldier on the wharf answered. "We don't see much of them unless the Emperor is in a really foul mood. Someone will die today, and not in a very pleasant way, either. I would stay out of its way if I were you."

"But he is staring right at us," one of the sailors gasped. "Look at his eyes. We didn't do anything wrong."

The captain of the ship pushed his way to the rail, the sailors moving apart to make room for him after they saw who it was. He stared at the approaching demon and swallowed hard. He had expected some type of reprimand after the spymaster came onboard hurt in Meliban. Clarvoy's mistakes were always taken out on somebody else. He had fretted about the problem the entire voyage back from Fakara. When he heard the spymaster mumble something about the enemy knowing that he was coming, the captain remembered Lady Mystic's conversation the day he had left the Island of Darkness. At first he could not believe that the Emperor's daughter was a spy, but he knew it was true now. The problem, as the captain saw it, was that the Emperor would never believe that Lady Mystic was a spy. Vand would believe his own spawn over a sea captain.

Knowing that the vile creature was coming for him, the captain moved away from the rail. He looked around in desperation and saw that there was no escape. He looked once more at the approaching demon and felt his blood run cold. His whole body shivered at the thought of the demon's touch. Hurriedly, he scampered up the mast as the demon drew closer to the ship. He pulled a line free from the mast and hurriedly tied it around his neck. By the time he had completed the knot, the demon stood alongside the ship. Shiny black claws reached out to snare the captain, but he deftly avoid them. He ducked behind the mast and then dove towards the deck. A loud crack rent the air as the rope went taut, the captain's body swinging wildly from the end of the rope a mere pace above the deck.

* * *

The city of Teramar on the Island of Darkness was teeming with excitement. A sea of red uniforms flowed through the city as soldiers

clogged the streets. Merchants closed up their shops as they ran out of merchandise to sell, and the inns were overflowing with drunken soldiers partying before the war. Outside the city, tents and campfires dotted the landscape as far as the eye could see. Tens of thousands of red-clad soldiers were still converging on the already packed city as the sun sank towards the western horizon.

On the roof of the main building hosting the headquarters of the army, Doralin stood watching the assembly of his armies. His red uniform was resplendent with numerous gold bars and stripes denoting the highest military rank afforded to an officer in Vand's army, that of premer. There were only four premers in the entire army, and each had dozens of generals under his command. For the coming invasion, Premer Doralin had been assigned thirty generals, each commanding a force of ten thousand men. Those armies were now converging on Teramar to board the ships.

"It is quite a sight," smiled General Valatosa, "is it not?"

"It is," the premer nodded in satisfaction. "We have waited for this moment for far too long, but it is finally upon us. Are your men prepared?"

"My army arrived last week," reported the general. "They are tired of sitting and waiting. Should I assume that we will be boarding within the next few days?"

"Your men will be boarding tonight," answered the premer. "We have been placed on hold by a message from the Emperor, but I have been promised an answer by sundown."

"On hold?" questioned General Valatosa. "Then the attack may not occur as planned?"

"The attack will occur on schedule," replied Premer Doralin. "I understand that there may be a last minute change in strategy, but that will not affect your army. You will still be the spearhead that lances into the enemy's heart. Make sure that the spirits of your men are high. They are to set the example for the other armies."

"About those other armies," frowned the general. "Many of the newest arrivals are a bit too deep into their ale. Fights have broken out at the inns. Can't you put a stop to it?"

"Let the men enjoy their last night on Motanga," shrugged the premer. "The ale will run out before too long in any event. The voyage is long enough that no one will arrive for battle in a drunken stupor."

"My men certainly won't," retorted the general. "I have placed the inns off limits to my army."

"Good," the premer smiled mischievously as he looked at the hard-nosed general. "I have a task for them. I want you to organize the loading of the ships. There are a hundred ships already in the harbor. You will begin loading them at sundown. Make the process

simple and quick. Once a ship is loaded, it is to sail out of the harbor to make room for another. I have two hundred ships off the coast waiting to get in."

"My men can handle that efficiently," declared the general. "Why are we waiting for sundown?"

"Just a precaution," answered Doralin. "If there are spies on the island, they will not see the ships depart. I have been using the same technique with the supply ships to Duran, but the movement of this many ships is bound to be noticed. But by then we will be well on our way," he added with a grin. "It is never wise to let the enemy know that you are coming."

"So the loading must be accomplished before daybreak," nodded the general. "We can do that. I will start organizing it now."

The premer merely nodded as the general left the roof. He turned and continued to gaze with admiration on the largest army ever to be assembled. His chest swelled with pride as he noted that it was his army that would strike the first blow on the mainland.

* * *

When Emperor Marak entered his office, the mage Ophia was waiting for him, which was highly irregular.

"Here or the roof?" the Emperor asked without preamble.

"Better on the roof," answered Ophia. "The messages are coming fast and furiously."

"Brief me on the way," nodded the Torak as he left the office and headed for the roof.

"First was a message from Rykoma," Ophia explained. "Hundreds of Vand's ships are missing from the Island of Darkness. They must have set sail during the night."

"Hundreds?" frowned the emperor. "Can you be more specific?"

"Not really," Ophia shook her head. "I asked the same question. All that he would say is that yesterday the harbor of one of the cities was crammed with ships. The coastline was also crowded with ships at anchor. This morning there were none. The harbors of the other three cities are still crowded with ships."

"Assuming that they divided the ships evenly," Marak speculated, "that would be around two hundred and fifty ships. Of course, they may not be divided evenly. Any idea where they are heading?"

"None," replied Ophia as they reached the roof. "There was also a message from Rhoda at Raven's Point. Several attempts to talk to you, actually. She refused to state a message. I don't think she trusts me."

"Don't take it personally," replied Marak. "Contact her now. She is dealing with some sensitive issues and was told to speak to me directly. I don't want anything lost in the process of getting the information secondhand."

“I understand,” nodded Ophia as she connected with Rhoda.

“What do you have for me, Rhoda?” asked the Torak.

“It has begun,” replied Rhoda. “Premer Doralin has left Teramar for the mainland.”

“Anything on the destination?” asked Marak. “Or the strength?”

“Nothing on the destination,” answered Rhoda, “but our source was willing to speculate. The suggestion was made that since Teramar is a southern city, and it was the point of departure, the Sakova would be a likely bet, but that is wholly conjecture. As for the strength, the number three hundred thousand was mentioned. They are searching for more information.”

“They?” questioned Emperor Marak.

“He has help now,” replied Rhoda. “I should not say more. Fisher is aware of it.”

“That is good enough for me,” replied the emperor. “Stay in position, Rhoda. I may need to contact you, and I may not be here when that happens.”

“I will be here,” agreed Rhoda as Emperor Marak signaled for Ophia to drop the air tunnel.

“Weave an air tunnel to Angragar,” Emperor Marak instructed Ophia. “Tell Rejji to contact Myka. I will be there within the hour.”

Ophia nodded and started creating the air tunnel. Emperor Marak wove his own air tunnel to StarCity and asked to speak to Lyra. The Star of Sakova responded promptly.

“It is happening,” Emperor Marak declared. “No word on the destination yet, but I suspect it is Alamar.”

“Are you sure it is not another test?” asked Lyra. “Perhaps an attack on Zaramilden?”

“Not this time,” replied the Torak. “Three hundred thousand are currently sailing towards us. This will be a test, but not the type you were thinking about.”

“Merciful Kaltara!” gasped the Star of Sakova. “We are not ready for this. That many men will walk right over Alamar. That is almost a third of their entire force heading for one city. I was hoping that the information we sent to them would cause them to send a smaller force.”

“Perhaps this is the smaller force,” sighed Emperor Marak. “We don’t have enough information about their strategy. Get your skimmers into the water immediately.”

“I am ordering it as we speak,” replied Lyra.

Marak could hear the other mages in the background issuing orders and alerting the forces. He was torn over whether or not to activate the skimmers from Angragar. If the attacks were indeed aimed at Alamar, the skimmers from Angragar would be useless.

Worse, he would have revealed their existence. Yet if the attacks were aimed more to the north, they would be essential.

"I have to get aloft," declared Emperor Marak. "You need to be in contact with someone in StarCity at all times. I will be posting mages on the roof here day and night, but I will be elsewhere. Also bear in mind that these communications are not necessarily secure any more. Anything revealing must be communicated in another way."

"I understand," replied the Star of Sakova. "I am heading for Alamar, but this palace will be manned all of the time."

"Is it wise for you to go to Alamar?" asked the Torak.

"I must," answered Lyra. "It is the only point of contact with the enemy that we can be assured of. After Alamar falls, a lot depends upon Vand's strategy, and we don't know what that is."

"Stay in StarCity," commanded the Torak. "I will be with you shortly. I can get you to Alamar faster than a choka."

Lyra frowned as she wondered how Marak could accomplish that, but she agreed to wait for him. The Torak dropped the air tunnel and dashed from the roof.

Chapter 2

The Armada

Marak had bundled himself in a heavy cloak, but the cold air still ripped at his body. His exposed fingers felt numb, and he could no longer feel his ears. The wind tore by at a rate faster than he had ever experienced before. Marak glanced down at the clouds below him. Small patches of the sea were sometimes visible, but Marak worried that they would not find the hidden armada.

"Perhaps we should fly lower?" suggested the Torak. "I don't want to miss Vand's ships."

"We will miss nothing," Myka snorted. "Ships are much slower than I am. What takes them days to cover, I can do in hours. When we reach the area where it might be possible to find them, I will go lower and slower."

"I hope it will be warmer then," quipped the Torak. "It is freezing up here."

"And I thought you were half Chula?" retorted Myka. "The cold air is refreshing. It will invigorate your body."

"If my body ever thaws," replied Marak.

They flew on in silence for a while before Marak felt Myka slowing down. The clouds rushed up past him as he gazed downward. Suddenly the clouds disappeared as the dragon descended out of them. There was nothing below them but deep blue water.

"Did you see anything?" asked the Torak.

"Not yet," answered Myka. "Have faith in your winged warrior, Torak. We will find them."

The dragon rose into the clouds again and picked up speed. Every so often the dragon would dip below the clouds for a quick look around. Finally, Marak saw the armada, and it was massive. Hundreds of ships bobbed upon the ocean like a large school of tiny fish. The sails spread out to the far horizon.

"Merciful Kaltara!" exclaimed the Torak. "I cannot imagine trying to repel such a force. Where are the skimmers?"

"I do not see them," answered Myka, "but they are much smaller. We might have to go lower to see them."

"No," Marak quickly responded. "I am not ready for Vand to know about you. There is nothing but water out here. How can we tell where they are heading?"

"Their destination is no secret to me," replied the dragon. "They

are heading due west. Unless they change course drastically, they will end up at Alamar."

"Can you tell me when?" asked Emperor Marak.

The dragon was silent for a moment and then rose up into the clouds.

"Tomorrow night is a decent estimate," Myka said. "Whether they will start the attack at night or not, I cannot tell. Certainly by the morning after, though. I can come back tomorrow to check up on them."

"I think that will be necessary," replied the Torak. "I would like Lyra's people as rested and prepared as possible. The more we know about the hour of their attack, the better off we will be."

"Do you want to search for the skimmers or head for StarCity?" asked the winged warrior.

"StarCity," Marak replied after some thought. "It is hard for me to judge distances up here, but I don't think the skimmers could be anywhere close yet. They were hidden far upstream in the Sakova. Just the journey down the river would take a fair bit of time. I hope they reach the sea before the invasion starts."

"Sounds like you could have used more notice of the attack," stated Myka. "Surprises are always costly."

"We have spies on the island," shrugged Marak, "but even they cannot see in the dark. Any suggestions?"

Myka did not answer, and Torak and the winged warrior flew on in silence. When they reached the coast of the Sakova, Myka dropped below the clouds again, although she kept a high enough altitude to avoid being identified. Marak looked down at what appeared to be a tiny city, but he knew better. He saw something south of the city that he could not identify. He asked the dragon to drop lower.

As the size of Alamar grew, more detail was visible. South of the city, the road was clogged with wagons and pedestrians fleeing the city. Ships of all sizes were leaving the port and following the coastline to the south.

"They are evacuating the civilians," remarked the dragon. "I hope that road is not required to bring in reinforcements."

"It will not be needed," replied the Torak. "We should see the bulk of the Sakovan armies between here and StarCity."

Indeed, a few moments later the first of the hidden armies came into view. They were clearly visible from the air as long as the dragon was passing over the sevemore forests, but once they reached the groves of fargi trees, the ground was no longer visible. It was impossible to tell what was hidden beneath the giant trees.

As the dragon soared over the mountains, the clouds gave way to bright sunshine. Marak went from feeling cold to perspiring as the hot

sun bore down on him. Of course the lower altitude added to his warmth. Myka had come into the mountains low and seemed to be delighting in banking from valley to valley. As the sides of the mountains flew by fairly close to his head, Marak drew his knife and jammed it into the hole in Myka's scale so that he had something to hang onto.

"Wimp," chortled the dragon as she banked so steeply that Marak felt his leg lifting off the dragon's back.

Marak laughed after he caught his breath. The laugh died in his throat as Myka headed straight into a mountain and then suddenly turned upward just in the nick of time. Marak held the knife with both hands as he felt his seat separate from the dragon's scales.

"Enough," pleaded the Torak when he could speak. "I prefer to die in battle where I at least have a chance."

"You must learn how to fly, Torak," taunted the dragon as she reached the peak of the mountain and immediately tilted to soar down the other side. "Learn to anticipate my moves and balance your body without the need to hang on. When we fly into battle, you will need both of your hands on the hilt of your sword."

"Fly into battle?" echoed the Torak. "What do you mean?"

Myka snorted and smoke blew out of her nostrils. "Do you think I am just something to ride so that you can enjoy the scenery?" she quipped. "I am a winged warrior. Have you not figured out what my specialty is?"

"I am to fly you into battle?" gasped the Torak.

"So," chortled the dragon, "you are not so stupid after all. I guess the elven princess was mistaken."

"What did she say?" Marak asked indignantly. "Which one was it?"

Myka snickered and soared upward again, rising along the face of a snowcapped peak. She flew over the peak and headed down again. Marak saw that they had just entered the valley of StarCity. The Sakovans shouted and pointed at the dragon as Myka soared low over the streets of the city. The people scattered before the flying behemoth, and Myka cackled joyfully.

"Into each life a little levity must fall," quipped Myka as she glided to a halt atop the palace.

Palace guards raced to surround the dragon, but they halted when they saw Emperor Marak sliding off the dragon's back.

"Which princess said I was stupid?" frowned Marak. "What did she say?"

"I don't know what you are talking about," Myka said innocently. "I wonder if that last bank loosened something upstairs, if you know what I mean."

Myka chuckled and winked at the Torak. Marak tried to act stern, but he realized that he was being toyed with. He started laughing just as the Star of Sakova arrived.

"I am glad that you can find humor in this situation," frowned Lyra, "but I cannot. My people are about to start dying. I find no humor in that."

"It was my fault," apologized Myka. "I thought some humor would ease the tension of the situation."

"Ease the tension?" echoed the Star of Sakova. "Does that include soaring into StarCity and terrorizing my people? You are very fortunate that my archers did not pepper you with arrows on your flight here. I am not sure what kind of sauce would go good with a giant lizard."

"Giant lizard?" whimpered Myka. "Oh, that hurts."

Marak started laughing so hard that he doubled over. Lyra stood with her hands on her hips looking angrier by the moment. Myka frowned in confusion, and her tail twitched nervously. Suddenly, Lyra could hold the pretense no longer. She started laughing also. Myka's eyes narrowed as she watched the two humans.

"How did you know Myka was coming?" asked Marak after he stopped laughing. "I thought you would be petrified by a dragon landing on your roof."

"So did Rejji," chuckled Lyra. "He warned me hours ago. He also warned me about Myka's strange sense of humor."

Large billows of smoke shot from Myka's snout as she shook her head.

"I guess I had that coming," admitted the dragon, "but Rejji will rue this day."

"Just make sure that we are around to see it," chuckled the Torak.

"Were you able to find the armada?" asked Lyra as she turned to a more serious conversation.

"We found it," Marak nodded seriously. "It is huge, and it is headed for Alamar. We did not see the skimmers. I fear that they may arrive too late to do any good. We saw the evacuation of Alamar. It gives a whole new perspective on things to see them from the air. Are you ready to go to Alamar?"

"I am ready," nodded Lyra. "How do we do this?"

"I will get on first," offered Marak as he started to climb up Myka's back, "then I will hoist you up behind me. Then the lizard can take off," he added with a grin.

Myka's tail moved swiftly and knocked Marak to the roof. The Torak fell into a roll and came up shaking his head.

"Oh, sorry," grinned the winged warrior. "You know how a lizard's tail has a mind of its own."

“Okay,” nodded Marak. “Truce?”

“I suppose,” sighed Myka.

Marak climbed onto the dragon’s back and extended his hand towards Lyra. She hesitated and looked Myka in the eyes for a moment before climbing up and grasping Marak’s hand.

“Oh, this is going to be fun,” cackled Myka as she leaped off of the roof and took to the air.

“Behave,” Lyra said as she patted the dragon’s scales.

Lyra wrapped her arms around Marak and held on as Myka soared out of the valley. The Sakovans shouted, cheered, and waved as the dragon disappeared over the peaks.

“This is incredible,” Lyra remarked as they flew over the forest. “So this is what our scout birds see when they go out on patrol.”

Soon they were over the sevemore forests, and Lyra saw the armies gathering below. As they approached Alamar, she saw the packed road leading south. She shook her head with sadness at the number of people being uprooted from their homes.

“Where should I land?” asked Myka.

“In front of the Imperial Guard headquarters,” answered Lyra. “It is that big building in the center of the city.”

Shouts rang out around the city as the dragon was spotted. Everyone stopped what they were doing and watched as the dragon glided into the city and settled in the street where Lyra had directed her.

“Too many people will believe in dragons before this war is over,” groused Myka. “That is not healthy for my kind. Next will come the adventurers intent on making a name for themselves. There will be no end to the torment that mankind can inflict on us. They will all want scales as souvenirs, or free rides so they can brag to their friends. What have you done to me, Torak?”

“Or they will revere you as the elves do,” countered Marak. “The humans are coming to know Kaltara. Those that survive will treat you with respect.”

“Hmm,” Myka replied. “You do look at things in a positive manner.”

The Torak and the Star slid off the dragon’s back. Marak instructed Myka to find a safe place outside the city to the north. He promised to use an air tunnel to find her and call her back when she was needed. The dragon took off as Lyra and Marak entered the Imperial Guard headquarters. General Manitow entered right behind them.

“I could not help witnessing your arrival,” greeted the general. “Welcome to Alamar.”

“Greetings, General,” smiled Lyra. “Alamar is the target of the

armada."

"We are sure about this?" asked the general.

"Positive," nodded Marak. "Unless they make a drastic change of direction. They are headed right for us and should arrive tomorrow night. Can I ask what your strategy is?"

"As far as the defense of the city goes," replied the general, "it has not changed since we last spoke. When Alamar falls, we are hoping to lure the Motangans along the coast road to the south. The remnants of my army will fight a retreating action, trying to slow them down and bottleneck their forces."

"Three hundred thousand men is a large number to string out along a road," warned Marak. "What if they decide to use the ships to get around your men?"

"We would have a rout," frowned the general. "My men would be racing for the next city."

"They can't," Marak pointed out. "The road is clogged with your evacuees."

"Mercy," gasped the general. "You are right. If we move faster than the citizens fleeing, we will be blocked. My men and the citizens would be slaughtered."

"What are you suggesting, Marak?" asked Lyra.

"I don't know," admitted Emperor Marak. "I think our planning is deficient because we could not visualize three hundred thousand men. It just meant a large number to us. Seeing that armada from the air today and realizing that each little speck on the water was a thousand warriors sort of brought things into perspective for me. We cannot play this Motangan army as if it were General Didyk opposing us with ten thousand men."

"Draw them into the Sakova," suggested HawkShadow as he approached the group. "Let them know exactly where our reserve armies are, and they will try to eradicate us. Their ships will be useless inland. When we get them into the heartland, they will be playing by our rules."

"But the bulk of your forces are Omungans," frowned Marak. "They are not used to fighting in the Sakova either."

"He is right, HawkShadow," nodded General Manitow. "The Imperial Guards do not use strategy as the Sakovans do."

"They will have to learn," shrugged HawkShadow. "My people can slow down the invaders, while the Imperial Guards take up positions that will be dictated to them. It is not a perfect solution, but it eliminates one advantage of the Motangans."

"Maneuverability along the coast," nodded Marak. "It also endangers StarCity which should be the last stand of the Sakovans."

"There will be no last stand this time," countered HawkShadow.

“If we have to lure the Motangans across the Kalatung Mountains and into Khadora, then that is what we will do. StarCity can be rebuilt just as Alamar can.”

“He is right,” interjected Lyra. “This fight is to the death.”

“But you leave your citizens open to attack,” argued the Torak. “The Motangans will be free to raid every coastal city while some of their army chases you across the heartland.”

“And we can’t move the citizens into the Sakova,” sighed General Manitow. “There would be no food to feed them, and we would be placing them in the path of the armies.”

“Unless we can disable their ships after they land,” mused Emperor Marak. “Without their ships, they cannot follow you into the Sakova and still raid the coastline. They will have to choose.”

“They would go for our armies,” asserted HawkShadow. “They can wipe out the citizens at any time, but only after our armies are conquered.”

“I agree,” nodded Marak. “Draw them into the Sakova and turn them northward. My armies can cross the mountains and come to help you.”

“It would be nice if you could get your armies behind them,” suggested Lyra.

“I could,” frowned Marak, “except for one small detail. Vand has another seven hundred thousand men on Motanga with the ships needed to transport them. We don’t know yet where he plans to strike.”

“A third of his armies for a third of our countries,” mused General Manitow. “You could soon have your own war to worry about, Emperor.”

“I do not have an easy answer to this problem,” the Torak responded. “I do think that we have to do something for the residents of the coastal cities. We cannot allow them to fend for themselves while Vand’s forces control the sea.”

“What are we to do for them?” asked Lyra. “If we use our armies to engage the Motangans deep in the heartland, we cannot also guard the cities.”

“I know,” Marak nodded with a frown. “I could use my ships to help transport the citizens away from the war, but who knows where Vand is going to strike?”

“Khadoratung is as far from the east coast as you can get,” suggested HawkShadow. “There was ample land there when I last visited, and your food supplies could handle large amounts of people.”

“We cannot transport the entire population of what was once Omunga to Khadora,” balked General Manitow. “That is impractical.”

“It is impractical,” agreed the Torak, “but there is some wisdom

in the suggestion. My ships are continually sailing the west coast of the Sakova to bring food supplies to those cities that have not yet recovered from the famine. It does make sense to carry some citizens back to Khadoratung where food is readily available. Also," he continued, "all of my armies are between Khadoratung and the eastern coast. It will be the last city in Khadora to be attacked. If Vand gets that far, our cause in Khadora is already lost."

"Which cities would you take people from?" asked Lyra.

"We should start with the citizens of Alamar," answered Emperor Marak. "They are already displaced from their homes. It is not safe for my ships to come here any longer, but we can begin picking people up at Tanzaba."

"It is only women and children fleeing the city," General Manitow pointed out. "Every man of appropriate age is staying to defend the city. I suspect the citizens of the other cities will react the same. The Omungan people have indeed become Sakovan in spirit as well as name. They will not give up their homes without a fight."

"We have great need of those citizens," remarked Emperor Marak. "In fact, I have some suggestions for their use during the war, especially the fishermen and sailors among them."

"There are many of them in the cities and villages," responded General Manitow as Temiker walked into the building and joined the group. "Omunga was a country that depended heavily on the sea. What do you have in mind?"

"The first thing they must do is preserve their boats, large and small," answered the Torak. "They should move them away from the battle or hide them where they will not be discovered. We must never lose the ability to take this war to the seas."

"Fishing boats cannot battle the behemoths that carry a thousand men," frowned Temiker. "What are you planning?"

"I don't have a particular plan in mind," admitted Marak, "but I can clearly see the need to maintain mobility on the water. Sometime during this war we may be faced with the problem of moving massive amounts of troops from one place to another. My fleet of ships is not large enough to handle that. Even transporting the women and children to Khadora will be a massive undertaking. There is no way that my fleet can transport all of them, but thousands of small ships may be able to."

"That might work," mused General Manitow. "One has a tendency to discount a ship that can only carry three or four people, but thousands of them can move quite a few people."

"If we used the boats from Alamar and Tanzaba to transport the people fleeing this city," mused Lyra, "the road would be cleared fairly quickly."

“I don’t know about quickly,” interjected Temiker, “but it could be done. There are also many fishing villages between the two cities.”

“Once the road is cleared,” Emperor Marak added, “start the evacuation of Tanzaba. Move the people to Okata. We will need spotters along the coast to see what the Motangan fleet does. If they find Tanzaba empty, they may not proceed any farther along the coast.”

“And if the spotters see that they are going farther,” nodded Lyra, “we can begin the evacuation of Okata before the enemy arrives.”

“Exactly,” agreed Marak. “In the meantime, my ships will carry some of the refugees to Khadoratung to ease the food supply problem. I think this can work, but some of the small boats must be preserved in this area as well. We do not want to end up with all of our boats in Okata.”

“I know you, Marak,” Lyra interjected, her eyes narrowing as she stared at the Torak. “You are contemplating something else that you have not mentioned. What is it?”

Emperor Marak grinned and shook his head. “It is an outrageous thought,” he shrugged. “Imagine how much easier these evacuations would be if we had just one of Vand’s ships. “We could transport a thousand people to Khadoratung at a time.”

“What will Vand’s ships be doing after the armies disembark?” asked HawkShadow. “Will they stay and wait for the armies? Will they return to the Island of Darkness for more soldiers?”

“I truly don’t know,” conceded the Torak. “With the number of ships that Vand built, I can’t see the ships going for more armies. My guess is that the ships would be used to bring in supplies to aid the armies already here. I can envision a fleet of them making constant trips to Duran. Perhaps some of them would be detailed to make runs between Duran and the Island of Darkness. As Vand draws supplies out of Duran, those items must be replaced.”

“I am beginning to see why you do not want to completely yield the sea to the Motangans,” sighed the Star of Sakova. “It is vital to Vand’s plans.”

“Very much so,” nodded Marak. “He knows that we will make the land here inhospitable for his troops. They cannot rely on getting any food while they are here unless it is shipped in.”

“Then we must cut off his ability to do that,” Lyra said adamantly.

“Yes,” agreed Emperor Marak. “You must draw his armies deep into the Sakova. If we can get forces behind him, it will not necessarily be to attack him from the rear, but to cut off his supply lines.”

“His army could turn around and retake Alamar,” warned General

Manitow. “You would need a force in Alamar large enough to withstand a second attack. I don’t see how we can do that.”

“That is the puzzle that we have to solve,” nodded Emperor Marak. “Our force in Alamar would have no path of retreat. Their backs would be against the sea. That is not an enviable position for any army. This problem needs a lot of input. Gather your generals and discuss it. I am returning to Khadoratung to do the same. Do you wish to return to StarCity, Lyra? Or are you staying in Alamar?”

“I am staying here,” answered the Star of Sakova.

“Only until the attack begins,” frowned Temiker. “We cannot lose the Star of Sakova in the opening battle of this war.”

“Lyra will be protected at all times,” countered HawkShadow. “Every Sakovan would give their life to protect her, and she is not without her own abilities to defend herself.”

“I understand that,” sighed Temiker. “Her power is immense, and she could kill many Motangans here, but there is great danger as well. Vand will seek to kill the Three. If he can do that, the war is lost, for it is those Three who must defeat Vand in the end.”

“There is wisdom in Temiker’s words,” frowned Emperor Marak. “Vand would gladly allow us to keep Alamar for now, if he could kill the Star of Sakova. How many dead Motangans is Lyra worth? A thousand? Ten thousand? A hundred thousand? Vand would gladly pay any of those numbers to destroy the Star of Sakova.”

“Are you saying that I should run and hide my precious body while evil armies overrun my cities?” scowled Lyra. “The Torak certainly would not. I can easily picture you leading your troops into battle.”

“There is nothing I would like more,” admitted Emperor Marak, “but I know that I cannot be allowed to do that recklessly. I am not saying that you should hide, Lyra. I am saying that you must measure the risk carefully. Your life is not yours to throw away. Neither is mine. We did not ask for this, but we have to live with it. I only ask you to be very cautious.”

Lyra’s lips pressed tightly together as she nodded in understanding. She hugged Marak and wished him a safe journey home.

Chapter 3

Skimmers

Premer Doralin stood on the bow of the ship, his smile broad as his eyes gazed over the breadth of his fleet of ships. The lookout, high above the deck of the ship, had just reported that the peaks of the Wytung Mountains had been sighted on the horizon. The premer immediately walked to the bow so that he would be able to see the peaks as they appeared. He was eagerly awaiting his first view of the mainland when the lookout shouted again.

Doralin gazed upward to see the lookout pointing to the south. The premer turned and gazed to port. Scores of huge ships bobbed atop the water, but he saw nothing amiss. He shielded his eyes from the sun and still could see nothing alarming. He turned and grabbed an officer who was walking by.

“Find out what the lookout is shouting about,” commanded the premer.

As the officer ran off, Doralin returned to gazing at the ships on his left flank. It was an awesome sight to behold as the huge ships rose and fell on the small swells. His mind drifted to the coming invasion, and he tried to picture the foreign city and what it would look like. The premer was deep in thought when the officer returned.

“The lookout has seen the sails of smaller boats,” reported the officer. “He thinks that they might be fishing vessels, but there are a lot of them. He thought you should be informed. Are they to be attacked?”

“Fishing boats?” frowned the premer. “We should not waste our time with them. I want this fleet together when we attack Alamar.”

The officer nodded and left. The premer faced forward again and returned his thoughts to the coming invasion. The fishing boats made his mind think of a peaceful city unaware of the coming storm, thousands of people going about their daily chores. He was well aware from the intelligence reports that the Sakovan armies were preparing for a fight, but he wondered if the citizenry had even been told of the coming mayhem.

The lookout shouted once more, and Premer Doralin gazed skyward. Again the lookout pointed to the south, but the man was obviously more frantic this time. Doralin turned to his left and raised his hand to block the sun. He could see the sails of the smaller vessels now as they came closer to his armada.

“Fools,” commented a voice as it came up alongside the premer. “Those small boats will be crushed if they get in the way of these huge ships.”

“Any sailor should know that, General Valatosa,” nodded the premer as he acknowledged the man next to him. “Can these Sakovans really be that stupid that they would put such small craft in front of this armada? I don’t think so. I think we are witnessing something a bit more nefarious than anything we expected. Summon a mage. Be quick about it.”

The small boats moved in close to the armada of behemoths. Premer Doralin watched with morbid curiosity as to what they would attempt to do. His jaw dropped and his eyebrows rose as the first harpoon was fired. The large ship that had been hit suddenly veered to port. Even as he was trying to understand what was happening, several other small boats sent harpoons flying into the large Motangan ships. The soldiers on the first ship hit started jumping overboard by the hundreds. Premer Doralin watched in awe as the floundering ship started to sink lower in the water. Several following ships slowed and started picking up the crewmen from the first ship. When the large ships slowed, they became easier targets for the Sakovans. The premer’s veins began to bulge and his hands curled into fists of rage.

“You require a mage?” asked the man in the black hood as he stopped next to Doralin.

“Send messages to the ships to our south,” demanded the premer. “No ship is to slow down for survivors. All small vessels are to be sunk immediately. Do it quickly. Thousands of lives depend upon it.”

The mage wove an air tunnel and began spreading the premer’s orders. Catapults from some of the ships tried to target the small boats, but the Sakovan crafts were agile, and the catapults had little effect on the enemy. Several more large ships were hit as Motangan archers raced to the rails. The screams and shouts of soldiers jumping from the sinking ships raged through the air. Doralin subconsciously bashed his fist against the rail.

The Motangan archers had better luck than the catapults. A rain of arrows flew into the sea, spearing the Sakovan boats that were within range. Doralin nodded with satisfaction as he saw several small boats floating with dead crews. Still, several more huge Motangan ships started sinking.

“What are your mages doing?” snapped the premer to the mage next to him. “Do they not have spells to counteract this attack?”

“No one has ordered them to attack,” balked the mage.

Premer Doralin turned abruptly, his open hand swinging hard into the mage’s face. The mage staggered backwards for a few paces. He looked up with hurt and rage on his face.

“Thousands of my men are dying out there,” bellowed Premer Doralin, “while your prima donnas stand watching. Order the mages to attack. Now!”

The mage moved away from the premer and immediately began sending orders to the other ships. Doralin turned back to observe the battle. Another half dozen Motangan ships were sinking, but bright fiery balls started soaring through the air as the mages began their attack. The small Sakovan ships started to burst into flames. Doralin nodded subconsciously and felt the presence of someone beside him. He turned to find General Valatosa alongside him.

“That will prove to be a fatal error,” the general said softly. “You should never strike one of Vand’s mages. He may obey you at the moment, but you will be marked for death.”

“I cannot believe those fools would wait for an order to defend themselves,” scowled the premer. “Do they think that conquering the Sakova will be a picnic? If anything, this attack on us shows their resourcefulness. We must never underestimate them.”

“I agree wholeheartedly,” commiserated the general. “They have been treated as royalty by Vand, and they have let it go to their heads. Still, you must fully understand their motivations. They would kill Motangan soldiers just as quickly as Sakovan soldiers. They are a society unto themselves. They will not mourn the thousand soldiers that go down with the ship. They will mourn the dozen mages that were on it. They will conspire to see you dead for daring to strike one of their own.”

“My rage was not wise,” nodded the premer, “but I will not concede that it was uncalled for. Gather the rest of the mages on this ship. Call a meeting of them below in my cabin. I will be down as soon as possible.”

“As you wish,” nodded General Valatosa.

After the general left, Premer Doralin walked over to the mage he had hit. He leaned against the rail alongside the man.

“I apologize,” stated the premer. “My actions were uncalled for.”

The mage glared at the premer but did not speak. Doralin watched as the flotilla of small ships fled from the battle. He was glad to see that less than half of them survived.

“Have all of the ships been notified with my orders?” asked Doralin.

“They are all aware of the new instructions,” scowled the mage.

“You are not making this apology easy for me,” frowned the premer. “How can I make this up to you?”

“Striking a mage is forbidden,” spat the mage. “You are not fit to live.”

Doralin smiled tautly and shrugged as he drove the knife into the

mage's back. The mage cried out in alarm, and several sailors turned to see what was happening. The premer hoisted the mage's body over the rail and tossed it into the sea. He turned to stare at the sailors who had observed the murderous act. One of the sailors ran straight for the premer, and Doralin braced for a confrontation.

The sailor smiled broadly as he approached. He stopped short and bent down to wipe the blood off the deck that had been spilled by the knifing.

"Sorry, Premer," grinned the sailor. "I guess some of the men must have missed a spot cleaning the deck this morning."

Premer Doralin grinned and placed his hand on the sailor's shoulder.

"Hardly possible, sailor," chuckled the premer. "You men at least are very efficient. You make me proud."

The other sailors laughed and nodded at the premer as he walked aft. Doralin made his way to his cabin where General Valatosa had the other mages waiting for the meeting.

"Today's attack on us has demonstrated a deficiency in our planning," Premer Doralin began without preamble. "The mage corps must be prepared to take independent action when necessary to protect the lives of the soldiers. Absent official orders from me, mages will be allowed to do whatever is necessary to respond to attacks. Are there any questions?"

There were no questions and the premer dismissed the mages. General Valatosa remained after they had left.

"That was hardly a meeting," frowned the general. "Was that necessary in the heat of battle?"

"It was necessary if they were to be down here when the other mage fell into the ocean," shrugged Doralin. "In any event, the battle is over. The Sakovans will not try that tactic again."

"They managed to sink a few of our ships," frowned the general. "Sounds like it was a win for them."

"It was," shrugged the premer, "up until the mages began obliterating the Sakovans. The next time that tactic is tried, not a single one of our ships will be hurt. I want you to get an assessment of our losses, General. Let me know how many men and ships we have lost."

* * *

Forty-seven skimmer boats floated upon the sea like a field of corks all tied to one another. Their sails were lowered, and the sailors were sad and disheartened.

"We lost a lot of good men today," grumbled one of the sailors. "The catapults were easy to avoid, but many a friend went down with an arrow in him."

“The mages were the worst,” griped another. “There is no way we can be useful against those mages. They can blast us out of the water before we get close enough to use the harpoons. We might as well go home.”

“Home?” questioned Formone, a young fisherman from a village north of Alamar. “And just where do you think home is? Yes, we lost fifty-three ships today, but they lost eighteen. Do you know what that means? We killed eighteen thousand of the enemy today. That is eighteen thousand Motangans that will not be available to rape and murder our wives and children. Yes, like you, I mourn the loss of my friends, but I am not about to give up this fight. At least not while I have a boat and weapons.”

“Are you serious, Formone?” asked one of the sailors. “We can’t go back there. Not a single one of us will get close enough to even scratch one of those behemoths. It would be suicide.”

“Maybe not suicide,” countered another sailor. “We could jump overboard if our boat is hit with one of those flaming balls.”

“Into what?” scoffed a sailor. “I am not sure what you were doing on the voyage from there to here, but I saw hundreds of sharks heading for the scene of the battle. No one overboard is going to survive out there. You might as well stay in the boat and burn to death.”

“If you aren’t willing to do what we came out here to do,” declared Formone, “you should give your boat to someone else. I plan to sink as many Motangan ships as I can before I die.”

“You’re nuts,” growled a sailor. “Show me a way to get close to those ships, and I will go with you, but I am not going back just to turn into a clova on a spit.”

“We just have to take them by surprise,” shrugged Formone.

“The last time, they saw us coming from a long ways off,” stated a sailor. “They didn’t understand what we were up to, and that is the only reason we got close enough to do any damage. We can’t do that again.”

“We can at night,” retorted Formone. “We know the direction that they are heading, and now we know their speed. It is simple to plot their location at any given time. We are small enough to sneak in between them without them noticing.”

“That might work,” mused one of the sailors, “but as soon as the first fireball goes off, it will be all over. We will be lucky to get two or three more ships.”

“Not necessarily,” countered Formone. “I suggest that we don’t strike right away. Pass by the closest ships and move further into the armada. As soon as someone notices us, we all fire our harpoons at the closest ships.”

“That might work,” conceded a sailor, “but you do realize what you are asking? We will get quite a few ships that way, but not a single one of us will be returning. We will be in the middle of three hundred ships with mages on every single one of them. We will be trapped.”

“What you say is true,” Formone acknowledged. “It is a one way trip. Because of that, I think each crew should decide this for themselves. Anyone who does not wish to be involved can cut his line to the rest of us right now. Float free and hoist your sails for the journey back to the mainland.”

“What mainland?” shrugged a sailor. “You were right before when you said that we have no homes. None of us are likely to survive this war, yet our actions tonight could save thousands of our friends and relatives. Count me in, Formone.”

Shouts of agreement rippled through the small group of patriots. Not a single man cut himself free from the line tying them all together.

“Alright,” explained Formone, “this is what I see us doing. We will want to strike in the middle of the night when most of their crews will be sleeping. Make sure that both your fore and aft harpoons are loaded and ready to fire. We will sail in groups of ten. The first group will have to penetrate the furthest into the armada. That is going to mean a lot of bobbing and weaving to get there without being seen. The second group will stay back about a thousand paces, and each group will do the same for the one in front of them.”

“We won’t be able to see that far at night,” frowned a sailor.

“I know,” nodded Formone, “but if we start out in proper formation and maintain a like speed, it will be close enough. The point is that we must not end up in a single clump. We must strike ships throughout the armada all at once. Fire your two harpoons and then try to get free. With any luck, one or two us might escape to describe this tactic to someone back home.”

“Aye,” nodded one of the sailors, “there are more skimmers in Fakara. It would be nice to tell them of our errors.”

* * *

The night was dark and foreboding as Formone piloted his skimmer towards the armada. Clouds had gathered overhead and were blocking the moon. Even the behemoths from the Island of Darkness were almost impossible to see. Formone stared ahead into the black of night, straining his eyes to determine if there was a ship in front of him. He couldn’t tell for sure, but the sea was alive with the sound of hulls cutting through the water and the occasional chatter of a seaman carried on the wind.

Formone felt his stern rise high in the water and quickly turned

his head. He nearly gasped out loud when he saw the huge bow pushing his tiny skimmer aside. He pulled hard on the tiller and braced himself for the wake of the large ship. With sweat pouring down his brow in the cool night air, Formone adjusted his course to take him deeper into the pack of leviathans.

A short while later, Formone had to jerk the tiller around as one of the wooden whales appeared right before him. He brought his skimmer through a hard ninety-degree turn, his sails falling limp as his starboard rail banged into the hull of the Motangan ship. He closed his eyes briefly and inhaled deeply. His partner used an oar to push the bow away for the leviathan, and Formone manned the tiller. Air filled the sails as the skimmer reversed course.

Formone turned again to port to pass behind the Motangan ship. The skimmer bounced wildly as they ran into the wake of the large ship. They rode out the turbulence and then Formone adjusted his course to the west so that he did not fall out of the armada.

For a brief moment, the moon peeked out between the clouds. Formone's eyes widened with fear and excitement as he saw half a dozen leviathans around him. It was like seeing something on a dark night when a bolt of lightning flashes around you. Unfortunately, the brief glimpse provided by the moonlight also afforded the Motangans the chance to see the skimmers. Shouts immediately rang out from several directions. Formone wasted no time. He immediately pulled on the tiller to point the bow towards the closest behemoth.

"Fire," he said softly, but urgently.

Formone's partner did not hesitate. He fired his bow harpoon into the darkness. A tremendous crash of broken wood thundered in his ears as Formone immediately spun his craft to port to avoid the soldiers who would be jumping overboard.

Sounds filled the night as men shouted and hulls burst throughout the armada. Cargo shifted on the decks of tilting behemoths and eerie creaks drifted on the air like the sighs of dying whales. Splashes in the water came from every direction as Motangan soldiers abandoned their sinking ships.

Suddenly, the dark night sky blossomed with the brightness of several suns as intense white projectiles streamed into the sky. It was suddenly as bright as daylight, and the carnage that had only been visible as sounds in the night, became apparent to every set of eyes. Motangan ships all around were in various stages of sinking. Formone gasped as he saw that he and a behemoth were heading for the same spot in the ocean, their bows on a tangential collision course.

Formone fought the tiller as fireballs crisscrossed the sky. Arrows rained down from every angle and the Sakovan heard familiar cries as his friends were cut down. Formone barely won the race with the

leviathan, the Motangans' bow nearly clipping the stern of the skimmer. He exhaled his held breath and let go of the tiller long enough to fire his aft harpoon. He watched in amazement as the metal head burst through the side of the Motangan ship. He was so close to the Behemoth that he saw the smoke rise up inside the hull from the acid that was released by the impact. He knew that within seconds a large hole would burst in the hull. Formone tore his eyes away from the damaged ship and grabbed the tiller.

"Get us out of here," shouted his partner.

"I am trying," Formone shouted back. "Load another harpoon in the bow just in case."

His partner nodded as Formone adjusted course towards the tail end of the armada in hopes that he could escape out the back. He was way too deep into the armada to sneak out the way he had come in. More bright projectiles shot into the air to replenish the light from the dying ones. That was when Formone noticed the behemoths sailing towards him. Not only had he managed to get deep into the armada, but he also managed to strike at its leading edge. Sneaking out the back was no longer an option. Formone turned once again to the south, but the wind was not favorable. Within moments Leviathans were all around him.

"This is it," Formone said to his partner. "We have one more chance to strike a blow. Let's make it good."

His partner nodded silently and manned the harpoon. The huge Motangan ship bore down on them and arrows started to sail through the air, but the Sakovan did not fire the harpoon. He waited patiently until he was sure he would not miss. Formone looked up at the deck of the large ship and saw the archers firing at him. He also saw the black-cloaked mages running forward.

"It has to be now," urged Formone. "The mages are coming."

The Sakovan fired the harpoon just as an arrow pierced his skull. Formone watched in rapt fascination as the harpoon blasted through the wooden hull. He felt the arrow hit his chest, but he was not surprised. He smiled as the smoke billowed out of the hole in the behemoth, and then he fell face first to the floor of the skimmer.

* * *

"I want to know the amount of damage," Premer Doralin shouted. "Get some more of those lights into the sky."

One of the mages cast a spell and sent a bright projectile screaming into the sky. The premer turned slowly in a complete circle viewing the catastrophic damage inflicted on his fleet. There was not a single quarter where some of his ships were not sinking. He cursed under his breath.

"I want mages to contact every single ship in the armada,"

demanded the premer. “Make a list of those who answer and those who do not. I must know the strength of my armies.”

General Valatosa hurried across the deck of the ship and halted alongside the premer. For a moment neither man spoke as they surveyed the devastation around them.

“I would estimate a third of the fleet is gone,” the general said softly. “That still leaves us with two hundred thousand men. That should be more than enough for the task at hand.”

“It should be,” snapped the premer, “providing those nasty little boats don’t return for another bite at us,”

“The ones that attacked us will never be returning,” replied the general. “It was a suicide mission. None of them survived. They didn’t even try to escape like the last time. They kept firing those harpoons until we killed them. You have to admire their courage.”

“I do admire their courage,” nodded the premer, “as well as their cunning in coming back after dark, but this episode makes me more determined to see those people annihilated. We have lost a tremendous amount of good men before this war is even started. I am now anxious to seize Alamar and show these Sakovans what ruthless cunning is meant to be.”

“We will have to slow the fleet soon,” commented General Valatosa. “We are getting close to shore.”

“We will slow,” nodded the premer, “but not before we change our formation. As soon as I get a list of functioning ships, we will guarantee the end of such surprise attacks. I want the fleet tightened up with a column of ships on each flank a distance off from the rest of the fleet. Those columns are to maintain a constant watch for enemy vessels. If an enemy ship passes the column into our fleet, I will hang the captain of the column ship who allowed it to pass.”

“A clever plan,” smiled the general. “We should pass that strategy back to Motanga.”

“I am not ready to report our losses to Vand,” Premer Doralin said softly. “Let us have a victory under our belt before we report in. That will soften the blow of our losses. In the morning we will crush Alamar. Tomorrow evening will be soon enough for a report.”

Chapter 4

Alamar

Emperor Marak walked into the Lords' Council chamber and found the members of the council leaning over a large map. He walked over to the group to listen to the conversation.

"The trenches are the lines that I have added to the map," explained Lord Quilo. "They are narrow enough that a horse can jump them, but too wide for a man."

"Then you are assuming that the Motangans will use only infantry?" asked Lord Chenowith.

"That is what has been passed on to me," shrugged Lord Quilo.

"He is correct," interjected the Emperor. "The information that we have is that the Motangan cavalry is minimal. With a million men they do not need to rely on speed. Besides, they would have needed three times as many ships if their armies were primarily cavalries. The width of the trenches is excellent for our needs. Our cavalries can buy time for our infantry to retreat and destroy the bridges and then the horsemen can leap over the trenches. The Motangans will be slowed down."

"Welcome back, Emperor," smiled Lord Chenowith. "I understand that you have been out of the city."

"I visited Alamar," nodded Marak. "The Sakovans need our help."

"What do they need?" asked Lord Patel.

"I am not sure yet," sighed the Emperor, "but at the very least we must house thousands of their people here in Khadoratung. I have ordered my fleet to begin bringing the Sakovans in by ship."

"How many thousands?" asked Lord Faliman.

"A lot," shrugged Emperor Marak. "Alamar will probably be attacked in the morning. Right now the only road out of the city is clogged with evacuees. They are going to use fishing boats to ferry the people to Tanzaba. My ships will pick them up there and bring them here. We must create a temporary city for them."

"I have thousands of people working on the trenches," frowned Lord Quilo. "I do not know how much time we have to finish the work, but I would hate to lose any of them. Can we afford the manpower to build a city? Can the Sakovans help with the labor?"

"The Sakovans will be mostly women and children," Marak shook his head. "The male citizens are staying to fight."

"We could use the armies of the clans in the Imperial Valley,"

suggested Lord Chenowith.

"Not for long," replied the Torak. "Those armies will constitute the bulk of our defense. I want to leave the frontier armies on the frontiers in case Vand has surprises in store for us, such as landing in Zaramilden and bringing his armies over the Kalatung Mountains. Our first line of defense will be the clans inhabiting the eastern coastal region. The armies of the Imperial Valley will be the second line of defense. By that time we will know what Vand's strategy is, and all of the clans of Khadora will join in."

"Do you still plan on holding to a scorched retreat policy?" asked Lord Kiamesh. "Because if you do, food is going to become scarce, especially with thousands of Sakovans relying on us."

"The Motangans will be the ones starving to death," countered the Emperor. "If we start starving, we will have lost the war."

"We could open up the Imperial Palace to the homeless," suggested Lord Jamarat. "I also have room on my estate. Other lords must have space as well, now that our mages have left."

"He has a good point," shrugged Lord Patel. "The palace will hold thousands. Also, many lords have homes in Khadoratung. They can be used as temporary quarters until suitable housing is built, on a voluntary basis of course."

"All of those ideas are acceptable to me," smiled the Torak. "I have two homes in Khadoratung and will allow them to be used for the Sakovans. Lord Jamarat, your training days are just about over. I would like you to handle the Sakovan people coming to Khadoratung. I think you have the right ideas to deal with it. Will you accept?"

"Gladly," beamed the Neju lord. "I will make them happy."

Marak smiled at Lord Jamarat. The man had suffered from brain damage as a child and his thinking processes and speech often reflected that of a child, but Emperor Marak had noticed a distinct improvement since his marriage to the mage Latril.

"Where will the Chula figure into all of this?" asked Lord Chenowith.

"I am going to speak to them tonight," replied the Torak. "Their style of fighting is rather unconventional. I am tempted to ask them to help the Sakovans, but I worry that we may need their help up here in Khadora."

"What are the Sakovans facing?" asked Lord Patel.

"Three hundred thousand Motangans are on their way to Alamar," answered Marak. "They should be attacking in the morning."

"Three hundred thousand?" echoed Lord Kiamesh. "That is far greater than the combined armies of Omunga and the Sakova. Didn't the Omungans only have forty thousand men?"

"They had forty thousand men in four large national armies,"

nodded the Torak. “They also had city garrisons of several thousand each, but your point is well taken. The Sakovans are badly outnumbered. I should point out that there are still seven hundred thousand men on the Island of Darkness. A portion of those will be coming to Khadora. I suspect that four to five hundred thousand will be allocated to fight against us. We will also be badly outnumbered.”

“The largest armies that we have are the Fakarans,” frowned Lord Kiamesh, “yet there is nothing there for Vand to plunder. Still, he would have to allocate at least three hundred thousand to Fakara to be assured of victory. That means that we are more likely to face four hundred thousand in Khadora than five.”

“I cannot fault your reasoning,” nodded Emperor Marak. “The real danger is even worse. If Vand can quickly crush either the Sakovans or the Fakarans, his armies allocated to those countries can flank us by coming over the mountains.”

“Which is why you want the frontier estates left intact,” interjected Lord Quilo. “That makes perfect sense now. They are our buffer against a surprise flanking movement.”

“Precisely,” nodded Marak, “but there will come a time when we are forced to use them.”

“Thus your conflict with sending the Chula to aid the Sakovans,” nodded Lord Faliman. “In essence, they will be helping us no matter where they fight, but we must decide where they will be the most effective.”

* * *

The Star of Sakova had a fitful night that was not very restful. Besides the nightmares, every strange sound awakened her. She knew that her nerves were on edge with the impending invasion, so she decided to give up on sleeping. She wandered out of the Imperial Guard headquarters where she had been given a room. The streets were empty and the city was quiet. She saw solders upon the wall that surrounded the city and assumed that others were patrolling the waterfront.

Lyra wandered the streets of Alamar with no particular destination in mind. Her mind wandered as erratically as her feet did. Images of her youth flashed through her mind, suddenly replaced with the sights and sounds of ancient Angragar. She remembered her first journey into the Sakova with her friends Syman and Antello, who had grown to become full-fledged Sakovans. Visions of her entire life passed through her head, but her thoughts always returned to Marak. No matter how much she tried to put him out of her mind and concentrate on other things, his smiling face always ended up stuck in her mind.

“You are going to wear those boots out,” came a friendly voice

from the shadow. “Can’t sleep?”

“Uncle Temiker,” smiled Lyra. “I guess there is too much on my mind to sleep this night.”

“Uncle?” chuckled the old mage. “I haven’t been called that in a while. I thought you would be thinking about the coming battle, but it sounds like your mind is in the past. What is bothering you?”

“I’m not sure,” Lyra admitted. “My mind has been wandering all night, but it always comes back to Marak.”

“You like him a lot, don’t you?” asked Temiker.

“I love him,” smiled Lyra, “but that hardly matters. It is a love that can never be. Perhaps if we had met in another place or another time, we would have a happy life together, but this war will tear us apart.”

“The odds are against any of us living through this war,” shrugged Temiker, “but those are just odds. People have beaten the odds before. Besides, you have Kaltara. You haven’t lost your faith, have you?”

“Certainly not,” Lyra shook her head vigorously.

“Well,” smiled the mage, “you are special in Kaltara’s eyes. If anyone survives this war it will be you and Marak.”

“That is where you are wrong,” frowned Lyra. “We have been chosen by Kaltara and given positions of great responsibility, but we are merely tools of Kaltara. We are the instruments to revive the people’s faith in God. Our task is almost over.”

“You think Kaltara is using you?” frowned Temiker.

“Of course He is,” nodded Lyra. “Do not take my words in the wrong sense. I am not feeling abused by God. I am thrilled to be His tool for the betterment of the world, but I also understand and accept my place in that world. The Three are to rid the world of Vand and to bring the people back to Kaltara. We will succeed in doing that, although I question how much of the world will survive the destruction that is coming to us. My thoughts go beyond that day of final triumph. Marak, Rejji, and I will be held up by the people of the world as saviors. We understand that we are not special, but the people will not understand that. They will want to worship us instead of Kaltara. That is not right, and it must not be allowed.”

“So what will stop that from happening?” asked Temiker.

“What else could cause it not to happen?” Lyra shrugged as tears welled up in her eyes. “Can’t you foresee what must happen? We must be sacrificed for the good of the world.”

“Preposterous,” scowled Temiker. “Put that nonsense out of your head immediately. Kaltara would not kill you for being His faithful servant. What kind of reward is that?”

“Our reward is in serving Him,” replied Lyra. “You do not

understand. None of us will object to the sacrifice. We will all go willingly. Kaltara knows this. It is not my life that I will miss; I will miss the life with Marak that is never to be."

"Where do I go to protest the deeds of Kaltara?" grumbled Temiker. "I cannot conceive of such treatment for the Three. I will not let it happen."

"Don't be silly," smiled Lyra. "You cannot dictate terms to God."

Lyra didn't notice right away, but she had lost Temiker's attention. The old mage had turned towards the waterfront and was sniffing the air. Lyra frowned at his sudden lack of attention.

"Have you been listening to me?" asked the Star of Sakova.

"Smell the air, Lyra," urged the old mage. "This fog that is creeping in is unnatural."

Lyra raised her nose and inhaled deeply. Deep furrows etched her flawless brow.

"It is the Motangans," she said softly. "The boy Kenda from Duran spoke of an eerie morning fog before the city was attacked. The enemy is offshore and getting ready to unleash their evil. The Time of Cleansing has arrived."

"We must rouse the city," Temiker declared urgently. "I will gather the mages; you wake the soldiers. Tell everyone to remain quiet. We must not let the Motangans know that we are awake."

Lyra nodded and ran off. Temiker entered the schoolhouse and started waking the mages. Within an hour the entire city was awake and quietly moving to their stations. By that time the sky was beginning to lighten, but the unnatural fog persisted.

Lyra stood on the roof of the Imperial Guard headquarters. LifeTender stood at her right hand and ValleyBreeze her left. The Star of Sakova gazed to her right where General Manitow stood with his advisors and a small group of mages who could cast the air tunnel spell. She waited patiently for the general to signal that his troops were ready.

"We are set," General Manitow declared. "Show us the enemy."

Lyra nodded to the two mages beside her who immediately gave a signal to the other mages lining the waterfront. Hundreds of mages simultaneously cast the same spell, and the wind started to flow eastward. Within moments the wind was roaring out to sea and carrying the unnatural fog with it. Gasps echoed all over the city as the Motangan armada was revealed. The ships had been sitting quietly offshore, their sails slack from the lack of wind. The Sakovans stared out at two hundred monstrous vessels sitting offshore.

The Motangans had been in the process of preparing for their attack, and the sudden disappearance of the fog caused chaos within the fleet. Some catapults were immediately launched, sending huge

balls of fire flying towards the city, but the wind had already hit the Motangan sails. The leviathans bounced every which way as the wind drove the ships backwards, causing most of the catapults to miss their targets.

Scores of Sakovan catapults immediately fired at the ships, some of them fired haphazardly, while others fired late because their operators took time to aim them. Those that were aimed fell short of their targets as the Motangan ships were blown away from the coast. The Time of Cleansing began with total chaos.

The captains of the Motangan ships recovered quickly, turning their bows out of the wind and retreating a safe distance from the city. The Sakovan catapults fell silent as everyone waited to see what would happen next. Lyra instructed the mages to rest and the wind died down. For a long time, both sides stood staring at each other. Eventually, the sun broke the horizon and the winds picked up. With the breeze blowing towards the shore, a dozen Motangan ships broke from the armada and headed south. Another dozen proceeded north.

“Send General Addley’s army to the south of the city,” General Manitow instructed his mages. “Notify General Romero to head north. Inform each of them that approximately twelve thousand enemy troops will be put ashore in their sector in an attempt to flank the city.”

The rest of the Motangan ships jockeyed for position as the armada reformed into four distinct groupings. Four long lines of ships, running north to south, faced the city. The first row of ships raised full sails and started moving closer to shore, while the other three rows sat motionless. The Sakovans tensed as they waited for the signals to respond to the new threat.

“There are so many of them,” Lyra sighed. “Give the signal to the mages.”

LifeTender and ValleyBreeze sent the messages to the mages using air tunnels. The mages had to work harder the second time to overcome the natural onshore breeze. The wind slowly died as the mages’ spells reversed the airflow. Soon a slow offshore wind began and started building in strength.

The Motangan ships fired their catapults at the beach where the mages were lined up, while the Sakovan catapults aimed for the stern of the ships to account for movement from the mage-created breeze. Huge balls of fire soared towards the beach, and groups of Sakovan mages scattered. The wind faltered a bit, but the mages who fled immediately rejoined the line in a different place. Several Sakovan catapults scored direct hits on some of the ships. Motangans raced around in an attempt to extinguish the blazes.

Another round of catapults fired from the ships. The behemoths

immediately turned out of the wind after firing and tried to dodge the second round of catapults from the Sakovans. One ship was hit with two loads of burning material and its sails went up in flames. It drifted freely as the crew tried to put the fires out. Even as the first row was retreating, the second row of Motangans ships started heading for the city.

"How long can your mages keep up the wind?" asked General Manitow.

"Not indefinitely," Lyra replied. "It takes a great deal of power to fight nature. The winds are against us."

"They are aiming their catapults at the mages," the general declared, "not my catapults. They are not afraid to lose ships this close to shore. Can you move your mages back?"

"Tell them to drop the wind," Lyra ordered the mages next to her. "When they start it up again, they are to slowly back up so their position keeps changing."

LifeTender and ValleyBreeze relayed the information to the mages. When the second row of ships got within range, Lyra gave the order to summon the wind. Moments later, lightning flashed in the clear sky. The lightning bolts slammed into the beach where the mages had just moved back from. Lyra gasped in horror as the lightning bolts blew up huge clouds of sand.

"Tell them to shield themselves," Lyra said to her mages. "Every other mage is to shield himself and his partner."

"That will cut the wind in half," warned ValleyBreeze.

"Do it!" shouted Lyra. "They can not keep up the wind for long anyway. I will not sacrifice our mages at this stage of the battle."

"A wise call," commented General Manitow as he pointed out to sea. "They are lowering small boats and have dropped their sails."

"Dropped their sails?" echoed Lyra. "They will be easy targets for our catapults."

"I know," nodded the general, "and so do they. They are sacrificing the ships to get their men ashore. Use your mages for other tasks. The battle has changed."

Lyra ordered the mages to retreat as she watched balls of fire impacting on the Motangan ships. Hundreds of small boats dotted the water as the Motangan ships used their catapults to bombard the city. Sakovan archers raced to the waterfront, dodging missiles that were slamming into the buildings of the city. Lyra looked out at the first row of ships and saw that every one of them was burning to one degree or another. The Sakovan catapults were firing as fast as they could be reloaded, and the Motangan behemoths were taking a beating, but hundreds of small boats kept rowing towards the shore.

"Tell the mages to concentrate on the small boats," instructed

Lyra. “Fireballs are preferred at this point.”

“Third wave coming in,” warned General Manitow.

Lyra looked out to sea and saw a new wave of leviathans dodging the burning and sinking hulks of the second wave. The smoke rising into the air from the burning buildings and the burning ships was growing thick. She saw her mages aiming fireballs at the small boats with qualified success. Some of the small boats were capsized and a few were burning, but there were far too many of them to hit them all.

As the small boats got closer to shore, the Sakovan archers opened fire. Thousands of arrows flew into the sea and rained down on the small boats. Suddenly, Motangan mages started throwing fireballs of their own from the small boats.

“Third wave is lowering their small boats,” announced General Manitow.

The catapults of the third wave were aimed at the Sakovan catapults. The behemoths fired as quickly as they could reload even as the small boats were being lowered and filled with soldiers.

“Their aim is excellent,” scowled General Manitow. “We are losing our catapults quickly. Our archers cannot keep up either. There are just too many of them, and they are being driven by a leader who is not concerned with losses.”

“Are you saying that Alamar is lost?” asked Lyra.

“Not yet,” General Manitow shook his head, “but I doubt that we can last the day. The Motangans will lose thousands of men trying to get ashore, but they will succeed.”

Lyra looked at the harbor and saw bodies floating everywhere. Some of the small boats were piling dead shipmates on the bow of their boats to hide behind, while others were throwing the dead overboard. All of the second wave ships had sunk, and many of the third waves ships were burning, but the Sakovan catapults had gone silent. The Motangan catapults were now targeting the city buildings. Sections of Alamar were aflame, and soldiers raced around trying to put out the fires. Temiker appeared alongside Lyra and shook his head.

“It is time for you to start making preparations to flee the city,” Temiker said softly. “There is little you can do here. Alamar is finished.”

“It’s too quick,” Lyra shook her head. “There are too many of them. I thought we could hold out for a few days at least.”

“Their commander is clever,” shrugged Temiker. “He found a way to overcome every obstacle. The Sakovans may hold onto Alamar for another day, but no longer. There is no need for you to be here, though.”

“His advice is sound, Lyra,” interjected General Manitow. “There is a lot of fighting left before the Motangans take Alamar, but it is foolish to endanger you. We will make them pay with a high body count. You can trust me to accomplish that.”

“I will leave,” Lyra agreed, “but not until the Motangans land. LifeTender. ValleyBreeze. Come with me.”

Lyra moved swiftly off the roof of the building. LifeTender and ValleyBreeze followed her closely, and Temiker panted to keep up. The Star of Sakova made her way down to the waterfront. Over a thousand archers peppered the Motangan small boats and hundreds of mages threw fireballs. The Motangan catapults aimed for the archers and the mages, leaving the entire waterfront area in ruins.

Lyra halted near her group of mages. Her eyes slowly scanned the seas until she found a Motangan mage in one of the small boats. She raised her arm and pointed at him. A blast of power shot from her fist. It soared over the waves and hit the mage squarely. The mage was blown from the boat, a fist sized hole punched clear through his body.

“Aim for their mages,” shouted Lyra. “Let the archers concentrate on the soldiers.”

Lyra’s eyes sought out another black cloak and blew him away. The rest of the Sakovan mages also concentrated on the black cloaks. Within minutes there were no fireballs coming from the small boats of the second wave.

“You have such power,” Temiker remarked with awe. “Try that force bolt on one of the small boats.”

Lyra nodded and aimed for the nearest small boat. Her bolt ripped through the bow of the small boat and the soldier behind it. The boat immediately began sinking and the soldiers abandoned it. Lyra targeted another small boat, but she aimed along the side of it. Her force bolt tore the side off the boat, immediately capsizing it.

“You are just trying to delay your departure from Alamar,” chuckled Temiker. “Keep that up and none of the Motangans will reach the shore.”

Fireballs erupted from the small boats of the third wave. They were all aimed at Lyra. LifeTender and ValleyBreeze had erected shields around Lyra, Temiker and themselves. The shields glowed brightly as a dozen fireballs impacted them.

“On second thought,” frowned Temiker, “taking out their mages is a better idea.”

Lyra nodded as she shifted her concentration to the small boats of the third wave. Temiker joined in as they targeted the black cloaks. The catapults from the Motangan ships suddenly started striking the area around Lyra. Temiker knew that the magical shields around Lyra would not protect her from the catapults. He grabbed her and dragged

her back.

"Now," Temiker said forcefully, "it is time for you to leave."

A catapult load splattered on the beach not twenty paces away. Flaming debris peppered the mages, who screamed and leaped back. Lyra sighed heavily and nodded.

"Organize the mages," she said to LifeTender and ValleyBreeze. "Continue attacking the Motangan mages if you can do so safely. Have them fall back when it is no longer safe to be where they are. I do not want to trade mages with the Motangans. That means preserving our mages is the priority. We will need them for the rest of this war."

Chapter 5

Retreat

Xavo exited the temple in Vandamar and hurried to the jungle path leading to the beach. He and Lady Mystic had magically carved out a clearing in the jungle a short distance from the beach. It was a hidden place where they could meet and talk without being observed in public. The Disciple of Vand smiled as he entered the clearing and saw Lady Mystic sitting with her back to a tree.

"That must have been a rather short session," Lady Mystic remarked. "I did not expect you for an hour or so."

"Secrecy is utmost at the present time," shrugged Xavo. "Clarvoy was wounded in Fakara, and Vand has become more paranoid, if that is possible. I was politely excused from the rest of the session."

"Excused?" echoed Lady Mystic. "That is highly irregular. I wonder if Vand suspects you?"

"I have no reason to believe that," replied Xavo. "All disciples were excused. I was not singled out."

"Hmm," pondered Vand's daughter. "Who was allowed to remain?"

"Only Clarvoy and the premers," answered Xavo. "I assume that they will be discussing strategy for the invasion."

"And the timing of it," nodded Lady Mystic. "It is curious that Clarvoy is involved. That indicates to me that they are concerned about the defenses on the mainland. I wonder if Premer Doralin has run into trouble."

"He has," nodded Xavo as he sat down next to Lady Mystic. "His fleet was attacked at sea, and his losses were heavy. Right now the battle for Alamar is ongoing, but victory is assured. Vand was not entirely happy with the report, not only because of the losses, but because the report came from one of Clarvoy's spies within Doralin's mage group."

"So Doralin has not reported in yet," mused Lady Mystic. "That means that there is little positive news to report. I did not think that the Sakovans even had a navy."

"They don't," frowned Xavo. "I can make no sense out of any attack at sea that could result in heavy losses. The report did not specify anything about the enemy fleet. In fact, the spy did not complete his report. The air tunnel was dropped unexpectedly. Clarvoy believes that the mage was killed before he could finish."

“Clarvoy has been to Alamar,” noted Lady Mystic. “He could send an air tunnel of his own to get a report.”

“Not without a large chance of having the air tunnel grabbed by a Sakovan,” Xavo pointed out. “Clarvoy has no idea of how far into the city Doralin’s troops are, and they still only know how to cast one type of air tunnel. Any reply he got back would be suspect. No, he has to wait for someone there to report in.”

“Without the air tunnels that I gave to Vand,” frowned Lady Mystic, “Vand’s armies would be fighting blind. I do not know how you could forgive me for that foolish move.”

“That is history,” smiled Xavo. “We cannot change the past. The important thing is that we are working together now.”

“That we are,” smiled Lady Mystic as she rose, “and it is time for me to do my part.”

“What are you going to do?” Xavo asked apprehensively.

“Try to squeeze information out of the premers when they leave the temple,” grinned Lady Mystic.

“You are an outcast,” frowned Xavo. “They will not talk to you.”

“We shall see,” smiled Lady Mystic. “Vand’s moods swing wildly. Those who are out of favor one day may be back in favor the next. As long as I am still alive, people will not shun me completely. You go ahead and report what you know. I will be back as soon as I discover something worthwhile.”

Lady Mystic left the clearing and walked the streets of the city until she had a view of the front of the temple. She leaned against a building and watched the citizens passing by, as if she were just whiling away the morning. It was over an hour before two premers left the temple. Premer Cardijja, who was based in Eldamar, and Premer Shamal, who was based in Sudamar, walked down the steps together. Tzargo, the premer based in Vandamar was not present, and Lady Mystic figured that he had remained in the temple.

The two premers walked together, chatting amicably, as they headed for the city docks. Lady Mystic knew that they probably had ships waiting for them to take them to their home cities. She allowed the men to pass her and then she walked behind them at a faster pace than they were walking. She caught up to them quickly.

“Premer Cardijja,” greeted Lady Mystic. “It has been a long time since you were in Vandamar.”

The two men halted and turned to face Vand’s daughter.

“And Premer Shamal as well,” smiled Lady Mystic. “Good morning. You must have been in to see my father. Did he give you another award, or did he slap your wrists?”

“Greetings, Lady Mystic,” frowned Premer Shamal. “You know that we are not allowed to discuss what goes on in the throne room.

Besides, you no longer enjoy the pleasure of the Emperor. We really should not be seen with you."

"Tsk, tsk," smiled Lady Mystic. "Your manners could use some improvement, Shamal. You are correct about my removal from the temple, but you forget that I am Vand's daughter. A father's ire does not last forever. Are you really so anxious for me to list you as one of those who was rude to me when I was temporarily in disfavor?"

"I do not think that was what Premer Shamal was inferring," Premer Cardijja quickly came to his friend's defense. "You know that appearances in Vandamar are always important. While your disfavor might be temporary, the Emperor would frown upon our friendliness to you at this time."

"I do understand," smiled Lady Mystic. "It is a game that we all must play at one time or another. I will admit that it is punishing to be outcast as I have been. I think I have learned my lesson well these past few weeks. I shall never make my father angry again, and I understand your caution as well. I will just walk with you to the docks to await your ships. That will not be sufficient to activate my father's rage."

The premers nodded glumly and allowed Lady Mystic to walk with them. There was little to be gained by ostracizing her when she might well stand alongside Vand once again.

"This is an exciting time to be alive," Lady Mystic said cheerily to Cardijja. "We are finally taking the war to the infidels. I would love to be on one of those ships, but father fears for my safety. As if I couldn't take care of myself," she added with a chuckle.

"You would make a fine addition to the mages," smiled Premer Cardijja, "but you would have more fun with Shamal's armies. I am afraid there will be little of interest for mages in Fakara. The savages have abandoned all of the cities. There is nothing but dusty plains left."

"That does sound boring," frowned Lady Mystic. "That is not my idea of a fun war. I envision more of a ruthless battle against enemy mages, where the might and power of the Motangans sends the enemies running in fear."

"You do have quite an imagination," chuckled Premer Shamal. "Seriously though, reports talk a lot about Khadora's newfound use of mages. I am slightly concerned about what might be waiting for us there. The Chula are one mystery that we have been unable to get any information on. They are cause for concern."

"Perhaps the Chula will not align with the Khadorans," shrugged Lady Mystic.

"Perhaps," agreed Shamal, "but I must plan as if they will. Maybe Clarvoy will find out on his trip to Khadoratung. I have asked

specifically for information about the defenses that I will run into. Without that knowledge, we are going to be fighting blind, and that is not the way to fight a war."

"Clarvoy will discover their secrets," Lady Mystic assured the premers. "There is no one finer at his craft in the entire world. Perhaps I will come to Sudamar next week for a visit, Shamal. I would like to talk to your mages about being included in the invasion. Their recommendation along with yours would do a lot to influence my father. I would like to fight in Khadora."

Premer Shamal stopped walking and turned to face Lady Mystic. He frowned and shook his head.

"I do not wish to be rude, Lady Mystic," the premer from Sudamar said, "but I have probably already revealed more than I should have. Were you not the Emperor's daughter, I would fear that I had made a treasonous mistake. Do not bother to come to Sudamar. There will be no time to impress my mages with your talents. Stay here and earn your way back into your father's grace."

Premer Shamal turned abruptly and walked off. Lady Mystic's mouth opened wide in a feigned display of shock at the treatment afforded her by Shamal.

"Do not take it personally," Premer Cardijja said consolingly. "Shamal is under a great deal of pressure, as we all are. The fact is, our fleets will be long gone by next week. If you truly wanted to fight, you should have made your case some time ago. Our ships will be loaded tonight. Forgive Shamal for his rudeness."

"I shall," smiled Lady Mystic. "I know that you two are good friends, and I would not want anything disparaging said about either of you. You have both served my father well. Good luck on your voyage to Fakara. I hope Vand has given you the tools required to assure victory."

"Three hundred thousand of them," grinned Cardijja. "Fakara will be ours within the week."

Lady Mystic waved as the premer walked towards the ship that would return him to Eldamar. As soon as he was onboard, she turned and hurried to the jungle clearing.

* * *

General Manitow stood on the roof of the Imperial Guard headquarters in Alamar. He gazed down at the ruined city and shook his head. The harbor was full of sunken ships and floating bodies. The beach was stained with blood, and the first two blocks of buildings were totally leveled to smoking piles of rubble. The Motangan soldiers were streaming onto the shore, abandoning their hundreds of small boats to float upon the water like flotsam.

There was fighting in every sector of the city, including around

the Imperial Guard headquarters, and yet the Motangan catapults still rained fire upon the city. Alamar was officially lost.

"Get me updates on General Addley and General Romero," Manitow snapped to his mages, "and prepare to sound the alarm to retreat."

"General Addley reports inflicting heavy casualties on the Motangans," answered one of the mages, "but he seeks permission to withdraw. The battle will soon be a test of numbers, and that is one that he cannot win."

"General Romero is already retreating," declared another mage. "He said that the Motangans landed before his men were in position."

General Manitow cursed under his breath. "Tell Addley to withdraw," he snapped, "and sound our own retreat. We cannot stand any longer with a flank exposed. It is time to leave Alamar to the victors."

General Manitow gazed once more at the harbor as he waited for the mages to prepare to leave. Some of the empty ships that had been using their catapults to pound the city were moving out of the harbor to make way for ships filled with troops. Suddenly, a catapult load smashed into the roof of the building. The general and the mages were thrown to the floor of the roof as a whole section of the building collapsed. The general rose and surveyed the damage.

"You have to leave now," shouted SilverEdge as he appeared on the roof. "We cannot hold this building any longer. There are just too many of them."

SilverEdge was a huge Sakovan from StarCity. No one matched him in size or strength except for Goral, who was even larger and stronger. General Manitow nodded as he helped the mages to their feet.

"Head out the back," shouted SilverEdge. "We will delay the Motangans out front for as long as we can, but I urge you to hurry."

SilverEdge did not wait for a reply. He raced down the steps and out the front door. In the street in front of the Imperial Guard headquarters, a small band of Sakovans were battling the Motangans, buying time for the mages and the general to escape. Two streets intersected in front of the building, creating three possible approaches that had to be protected. HawkShadow and SkyDancer blocked the street to the north, while StormSong and DarkBlade blocked the south. Goral stood alone facing east, and SilverEdge rushed to join him.

"Just in time," Goral said to his partner. "Here they come again."

The Motangans rushed the eastern approach first, and the two giants started swinging their long two-handed swords. Goral's first swing cut a Motangan soldier in two, while SilverEdge decapitated a man. Seconds later shouting red-clad soldiers rounded a corner and

came running towards HawkShadow and SkyDancer. The two Sakovans danced lightly on their feet as they swung at the enemy. As if choreographed, the couple worked their way along the street killing Motangans with every swing. Whenever one's back was exposed, the other covered it.

"Bring it back, HawkShadow," shouted StormSong as Motangans charged the southern position. "We also have company."

HawkShadow issued a curt command to SkyDancer, and the duo broke contact and ran back to their original positions before spinning around and reengaging the enemy that had followed them.

StormSong and DarkBlade performed no dance for the Motangans. They stood their ground and used their strength to slay the charging enemies. Many of the Motangans, surprised to see a female fighting, mistook StormSong for an easy opponent. The truth killed them, as the female Sakovan slashed into their ranks.

Motangan body parts piled up in front of the two giants as Goral and SilverEdge held their ground. Goral turned for a quick glance at the roof of the Imperial Guard headquarters and saw that it was empty.

"We are through here," he shouted as he severed a Motangan's arm and followed up with a decapitation. "Time to move out."

All six Sakovans started slowly backing up towards the steps of the Imperial Guard headquarters. They continued to battle the Motangans with every step until all six of them were crowded on the steps.

"Love birds first," shouted StormSong. "Use your stars."

HawkShadow and SkyDancer turned and raced into the building. They immediately sheathed their swords and grabbed Sakovan Stars from their pouches. HawkShadow pointed to the Motangans just beyond StormSong and DarkBlade. SkyDancer nodded, and two Sakovan Stars flew through the doorway and impacted into the foreheads of two Motangan soldiers.

DarkBlade faced no opponent and dove through the doorway. HawkShadow and SkyDancer repeated the throwing of stars and killed two more Motangans, allowing StormSong to enter the building.

"Secure the rear exit," commanded HawkShadow as he and SkyDancer fisted more stars.

DarkBlade and StormSong nodded and raced through the building to the rear door. They threw open the door and stepped into the alley, their swords ready for anything. The alley was empty, and they waited for their friends to arrive. Moments later, the two giants came running out the back of the building.

"We will secure the gate out of the city," shouted Goral as they sped across the alleyway and through the ruins of a demolished

building.

Less than a minute after the giants, HawkShadow and SkyDancer exited the building and ran past. StormSong slammed the door shut while DarkBlade shoved a burning timber in place to jam the door. They turned and ran after their friends as Motangans appeared at both ends of the alleyway.

StormSong saw other Sakovans racing for the exit from the city as she and DarkBlade dodged burning debris. Suddenly, an arrow raced past her head, and she knew that their retreat was cutting things a little close. The Motangan archers should not have been in the vanguard of the attack unless one of the flanking armies had managed to reach the city already. She wondered how many friends were still in the falling city. She immediately began running erratically to foil the archer's aim. DarkBlade needed no encouragement to do likewise. They slowed down as they approached the gates to let other Sakovans who were ahead of them have time to get through. StormSong's eyes focused on the gates as she continued to weave as she ran. She saw Goral slam one of the gates shut and prop something against it.

Another arrow sped by StormSong's ear and imbedded in the gate that Goral had just closed. A shiver raced up her spine as she dashed through the open gate. DarkBlade followed her through and shouted for the gate to be closed. SilverEdge moved to close the remaining gate while Goral bent over to pick up a huge log that had been placed there to secure the gate. He wrapped his large arms around the log and lifted it. As he turned to shove it into place, he saw the gate was not fully closed.

Goral turned and looked for his partner. SilverEdge's large body was sprawled on the ground, an arrow piercing his neck. His lifeless eyes stared up at Goral. Goral slammed the log into the gate, forcing the gate closed and jamming it from being opened. He groaned as he bent and lifted SilverEdge's body and threw it over his shoulder.

* * *

The Star of Sakova stood staring at the map in the farmhouse just outside of Breele. Gathered around her were her generals and advisors.

"I thought they would follow us into the Sakova," frowned Lyra. "Why aren't they?"

"They are consolidating," explained General Didyk. "Doralin suffered larger losses to take Alamar than he had anticipated. He will need to heal the wounded and replenish supplies. He might even send for reinforcements."

"He has no need of reinforcements," frowned General Manitow. "His army is larger than anything I could imagine."

"He has access to supplies at Duran," frowned Lyra. "I did not

think that he would need them so soon."

"Are the supplies guarded?" asked Temiker.

Lyra's eyebrow rose as she stared at her uncle. "What if they are not?" she asked. "We cannot get at the supplies there. Your knowledge of geography surely must be better than you are letting on. Duran is unapproachable from the land, and we have a huge fleet of enemy ships sitting off our coast. Why would you ask such a question?"

"For the same reason that I ask any question," shrugged Temiker. "I hoped to get an answer and expand my knowledge. Are the supplies guarded?"

"I don't know," answered Lyra. "When Marak saw the city, three ships were unloading. There were seamen scurrying around the city, but I have no idea if it is guarded. Satisfied?"

"Somewhat," smiled Temiker as he turned and ushered a sailor forward. "I think you should hear what this young man has to say before you write off the supplies at Duran."

Lyra frowned at the hint of mystery, but she recognized the sailor as having been on her voyage to Duran and smiled at him.

"Chargo," greeted the Star of Sakova. "What do you have to tell me?"

"I have a plan against the enemy," Chargo replied. "I want your permission to execute it."

"And what is this plan?" asked Lyra.

"I noticed that the Motangan ships are languishing offshore," explained Chargo. "A bunch of fishermen and shipyard workers were talking about capturing some of them. We could use them to attack the other ships."

"Or to raid the supply depot in Duran," interjected Temiker. "Why not liberate the Motangan supplies?"

"That would hurt Doralin a great deal," nodded General Manitow. "His armies will depend on those supplies."

"You are just going to swim out to sea and steal a Motangan ship?" frowned Lyra. "You can't be serious."

"Not just one," grinned Chargo. "I think we could get several. We wouldn't have to swim out. Many villagers brought their boats up to Breele when they heard that the Motangans were coming. We could go down the Maritako River at night and sail up to the huge ships. It would be pretty easy."

"And what about the crews of the ships?" asked Lyra.

"We could overpower them," shrugged Chargo. "Some of the crews might even go ashore. We could sail away in the dead of night, and the Motangans won't even miss the ships until morning."

"They might not even be alarmed if the ships are missing," General Didyk interjected. "If no crewman survives to give details,

there are many possibilities for missing ships. They could have sunk, returned to Motanga, or gone to Duran for supplies. I think the plan has great merit."

"And we could use the ships to ferry civilians to Khadora," added General Manitow. "What have we got to lose?"

"Our people," frowned Lyra as she shook her head. "How many people are in on this scheme?"

"I have over a hundred volunteers," replied Chargo. "I could easily get more if I need them. These fishermen are not warriors, Lyra. They will be of no use tromping through the forests fighting the Motangans. This is a way that they can contribute, a way to strike back at the Motangans. They all understand that they might die in the attempt, but they still want to do it. All we need is your blessing."

"And how will we contact you?" asked the Star of Sakova. "Not one of you can weave an air tunnel. We will never know if you succeeded or died trying."

"I will go with them," volunteered Temiker. "I assure you that I can weave an air tunnel."

Lyra stared at her uncle with disbelief. "You really feel that strongly about this?" she asked.

"I am an old man, Lyra," smiled Temiker. "I may still be able to wield the power, but I do not look forward to a long campaign of running through the forests. Besides, I think it will demoralize the enemy. We must continue to do what is not expected. I also think there are innumerable uses for a Motangan ship. We can infiltrate their navy. We can impersonate Motangans. We can transport people or supplies, and if need be, we can attack."

"What if Duran is guarded?" asked the Star of Sakova.

"We will have uniforms from the crewmen that we kill," answered Chargo. "We will pretend to be from Doralin and tell them that we have come for supplies. We will even let them help us with the loading," he added with a grin.

"You both are incorrigible," Lyra smiled as she shook her head. "You have my permission, Chargo, with one condition."

"Anything," smiled the sailor.

"Make sure that my uncle is not hurt," stated Lyra. "The Sakovans still have a need for such old men."

"He will not be hurt," Chargo promised excitedly.

Chargo and Temiker left the farmhouse to plan their mission. Lyra watched them leave and then turned her attention to the map.

"How do we get the Motangans to come towards us after they have rested?" asked Lyra.

"You need not worry about that," replied General Didyk. "They want to come after us. This war is not about gaining territory. They

seek to annihilate us. They have to come after us."

"Then let's start planning a reception for them," responded the Star of Sakova. "Who wants to be first to present ideas?"

Chapter 6

Pirates

Premer Doralin sat at the long table in the dining room of Temiker's schoolhouse in Alamar. It was one of the few buildings in the city that had somehow managed to withstand the bombardment unscathed. General Valatosa stood before the premer, looking rather uncomfortable.

"All I know is that the report was from a mage spy that Clarvoy managed to insert into one of my armies," scowled the premer. "If it wasn't so obvious that the mage had died before finishing his report, I would be hunting for him right now."

"You should avoid saying such things," advised the general. "I know how you feel about the mages, but they do have a voice that reaches to the Emperor. It is unwise to vocalize your feelings about them."

"Your warning has been noted," sighed Doralin. "Valatosa, I need your help. These Sakovans are a wily bunch, and the other generals do not recognize that."

"Wily?" frowned the general. "In what way?"

"In every way possible," replied the premer. "Do you think it is purely accidental that there is not a scrap of food in this entire city, yet there are stockpiles of ale? I should be pushing towards Breele to keep the Sakovans off balance; instead I have a city full of drunken soldiers. This is no accident. The Sakovans have planned well for this invasion."

"The ale is a problem," agreed the general, "but I am not sure that I agree totally with your assessment. We took Alamar in one day. If the Sakovans had planned well, we would still be trying to get ashore."

"Would we?" the premer asked skeptically. "I don't think the Sakovans want to fight us in the city. I think they plan to lure us into remote terrain that only they have any knowledge of. Look at this map Clarvoy supplied. It shows exacting details of every city, village, and road in the entire country, but what do you see in the center of it all?"

"Nothing," shrugged Valatosa. "It is all forest. What is there to chart?"

"How about individual mountain passes?" prompted the premer. "Rivers? Lakes? Where is this famed StarCity? There is nothing in the center of this map."

“Over the past few years,” responded General Valatosa, “when it was clear what sector I would be assigned to, I made a point of reading everything I could about Omunga, as the country was called at that time. It consisted only of the coastal cities. The interior of the country was a void, as it is on this map. It was known as the Sakova, but no one dared to enter it. Omungans who tried to were never heard from again. I can well expect the same held true for Clarvoy’s spies. I am troubled somewhat by a lack of geographic features, but I think we can overcome that deficit.”

“We have read the same reports,” replied Premer Doralin, “but I do not share your optimism. I know when I am being lured into a trap, yet I truly have no say in the matter. The Sakovans have retreated into their heartland. We must follow them.”

“Agreed,” nodded the general. “What help is it that you require from me?”

“I want your army to be more than the spearhead,” answered the premer. “I want your men to be my eyes and ears within the other armies.”

“That is highly irregular,” frowned the general. “My men are not trained to spy on others. They are elite warriors.”

“Understood,” sighed Doralin. “I am not asking for spies. I am asking that they merely let me know what is happening in a general sense. Take this ale problem for example. I noticed that only your men refused to imbibe in the free ale this evening.”

“I would not tolerate it,” frowned General Valatosa. “My men know that.”

“Exactly,” nodded Doralin. “And if I had known about the problem early enough, I could have prevented the other armies from indulging. That is the type of information that I am looking for. Have your men be alert for these wily tricks of the Sakovans. Have them notify me when something is amiss. That is all that I am asking for.”

“I have no problem with that,” agreed the general. “I do question your pessimism in regards to the Sakovans though. I do not see them as being clever. The lack of details on the maps is logical. As for the ale, why would they cart it through the forests with them when they were forced to flee? I think the Sakovans hold no more surprises for us.”

Several blocks away from Temiker’s schoolhouse, where the premer and the general were talking, the Maritako River ran through the city of Alamar. At that very moment, in the dark of night, small boats of various designs were floating down the river and through the city. Were anyone to glance upon the boats, they would have appeared empty, but a closer inspection would have revealed Sakovan fishermen in the bottom of the vessels covered by dark tarps.

As the river carried the fishing boats into the sea, the fisherman rose from their concealment. They hoisted their sails only far enough to catch the gentle breeze required to propel the crafts to the large ships off the coast. The small boats scattered over a wide area and then, using signals to select their quarry, converged on a small fleet of behemoths that appeared undamaged.

The small boats tied off to the sterns of the behemoths, and the fisherman stealthily climbed aboard. In a slow and methodical manner, the fishermen silently murdered the crews. Even after they had control of the ships, they did not act with nervous hurriedness. They slowly and quietly raised the anchors of each of the ships, allowing the outgoing tide to carry the vessels away from Alamar. When the leviathans were well offshore, the sails were raised on the new Sakovan fleet. In a tight formation, the ten ships headed north without the Motangans being alerted.

"For fishermen," chuckled Temiker, "your men make great thieves. Ten ships are far more than we thought was possible."

"That is what made it possible," grinned Chargo as he pointed to the barrel of ale. The whole fleet was drunk. We could have taken every ship if we had more men."

"As most thieves eventually find out," frowned Temiker, "greed is a killer. If an alarm had been given, you would have found out that even drunken mages can cast spells. I would assume that holds true for archers as well, but I was never good with a bow. What will you do with the fishing boats that we are towing? It will be hard to appear Motangan with them being towed."

"There is a cove up the coast a ways," answered Chargo. "We will stop and anchor them there. Hopefully they will last through the war so that the fisherman can earn a living when this is all over."

"So you expect the Sakovans to win this war?" asked Temiker. "The odds are against it."

"I have gone against the odds before," shrugged Chargo. "If I am wrong, we will all be dead, and the fishermen won't care about their boats, but I expect to be around. Kaltara is strong."

"You believe in Kaltara?" asked Temiker. "You were an Omungan, weren't you?"

"I was Omungan," nodded Chargo. "I had the pleasure of being on the same ship with the Star of Sakova the day she accepted Duran's surrender. That day changed my life. How can I not believe in a God that can do miracles? Because that is exactly what Kaltara has enabled Lyra to do. I had a long talk with her on that voyage. My faith has not faltered since."

"She is a remarkable woman, my niece," smiled the old mage. "I should notify her of our success. Sometimes she worries too much."

* * *

“Ten?” gasped Emperor Marak as he stood on the roof of the palace in Khadoratung. “Your people are incredible, Lyra. We can make great use of those ships.”

“There is more,” continued the Star of Sakova. “They found a skimmer floating in the ocean. In fact, they almost ran over it. There were two bodies in it. One of them was alive, a fisherman named Formone. Temiker is doing what he can for the man right now, but we aren’t sure if he will live.”

“None of the skimmers returned,” frowned the Emperor. “Is that correct?”

“That is correct,” answered Lyra. “I think this man may have the information about what went wrong.”

“I want to talk to him,” decided the Torak. “Where are the ships now?”

“On their way to Duran,” replied Lyra. “They are going to steal the supplies the Motangans have left there.”

“There are Motangan soldiers in Duran,” warned Marak.

“I thought you were not sure,” responded Lyra.

“I had Myka fly over again on the way to Changragar,” the Torak said. “It was not a lot of soldiers, but even a single corte is far too many for fishermen to go up against. They must not enter Duran.”

“Temiker is with them,” advised Lyra. “His magic should help.”

“It would,” replied the Torak, “except that Temiker is on one of the ships. They most certainly will have a mage in Duran who knows how to use an air tunnel. Let’s not let Vand know that we have his ships.”

“And let him keep the supplies?” frowned the Star of Sakova. “I don’t think so. Besides, those fishermen would not accept my orders to turn back. In fact, I am quite sure that Temiker would suddenly have trouble hearing my orders.”

“I can easily imagine that,” chuckled the Torak. “Alright, I will go there in the morning with Myka. We will clear the city before the ships arrive.”

“By yourself?” scowled Lyra. “That is just what I expected from you. I am supposed to hide myself so that I don’t get hurt, but you are going to fly in on your magic dragon and take on sixty men by yourself? I don’t think so.”

“Myka cannot carry a corte of soldiers on her back,” sighed Marak. “There is no land approach to the city, and the only ships we have in the area are the ones we don’t want them to know about. What do you expect me to do?”

“I expect you to come to Breele and pick me up,” answered Lyra. “I am not without capabilities of my own. We can split the Motangan

soldiers between us. It will be safer that way."

There was a long silence in the conversation and then Marak chuckled.

"It will be a three way split," he announced. "I am sure that Myka will want to claim her third."

"Then you will come to get me?" Lyra asked with astonishment.

"I left Myka at Changragar," nodded the Torak. "I will be in Breele before sunrise. Place four torches in a square to mark a clear spot for the dragon to land."

"Done," Lyra replied excitedly. "I will let Temiker know what we are planning."

Marak felt the air tunnel being dropped, and he turned to go inside. He found Fisher standing a few paces away.

"You have been working on your stride," commented the Torak. "I did not hear you approach this time."

"I have been more conscious of it," smiled Fisher. "I have also been thinking a lot about your news this evening."

"About Clarvoy coming to Khadora?" asked Marak.

"Yes," nodded Fisher. "I want to get him."

"I can well imagine that," frowned the Torak, "but I advise you not to become obsessed with him. It will lead you to make mistakes, and mistakes can be deadly."

"I will be careful," promised Fisher, "but I wanted to ask a favor. You mentioned once that Lord Chenowith reviewed his father's private papers. I understand that Emperor Bagora was noted for keeping extensive journals about every detail of his life. I would like to see those papers."

"Inconceivable," Marak shook his head. "Lord Chenowith felt guilty reviewing the papers, and he was Bagora's son. He would never permit anyone else to see them. What could you possible want with those papers anyway?"

"Emperor Bagora was also noted for having an extensive network of spies," answered Fisher. "I must know who they are."

"Why?" puzzled the Torak.

"Few spies are ideological," explained Fisher. "Most of them perform services for the gold. Oh, I can imagine that the Emperor had a fair number of spies who worked for him because they believed in him, but others saw only the money."

"And what is the importance of this?" asked Emperor Marak.

"A spy that works for gold," explained Fisher, "can be bought by many masters. I think that is how Clarvoy built his spy network. I certainly don't think that many Khadorans would serve Vand for his ideology."

"But Clarvoy could bring in people from Motanga," Marak

pointed out.

"True," agree Fisher, "and no doubt he did, but those people will have no history in Khadora. Their access to really valuable information would be extremely limited. Clarvoy gets his really good information from professional spies, people who have been a part of Khadora all of their lives. These people sell their information for gold, and I believe that Emperor Bagora would have ferreted out every single one of them."

"So Clarvoy and Bagora were using the same spies," mused the Torak. "Your reasoning is sound, Fisher, but it leads nowhere. I would not even ask Lord Chenowith to allow you access to the journals. I personally know the anguish his own access has caused in his mind. He would not allow it. He would rather die than have his father's papers read, and Khadora cannot afford to lose him. I cannot afford to lose him."

"Even for a chance at Clarvoy?" frowned Fisher.

"Even for that," nodded Marak. "I intend to defeat Vand with or without Clarvoy. I can only do that with the clans of Khadora united behind me. Lord Chenowith has made that possible in the past, and he continues to make it possible now. I could not ask that of him."

"I understand," Fisher nodded with defeat.

"Do you?" smiled Marak. "Fisher, I believe in you. Perhaps I believe in you more than you believe in yourself. I cannot ask of Lord Chenowith what you request of me, but you are resourceful. I have full confidence that you will snare Clarvoy."

Fisher brightened at the Emperor's words of encouragement. He smiled at the Torak and retreated from the roof of the palace.

* * *

The Walkan clan of Khadora had one of the largest estates in the Imperial Valley. It was one of the ancient founding clans of Khadora and had produced some of the country's most notable lords. One of those notable lords was the late Emperor Bagora. The Walkan clan also had one of Khadora's largest armies whose uniforms were red and blue, not too different from the red and black of the Ronan clan, seeing as the blue used by the Walkan clan was a deep, dark blue. The enormity of the Walkan army also allowed for officers that were not familiar with every single soldier on the estate.

As fate would have it, Fisher just happened to own a Ronan clan uniform that he had worn on the day Emperor Mirakotto and Lord Garic had mysteriously died. He now wore that red and black uniform again as he moved through the fields of the Walkan estate.

Fisher had been to the Walkan estate numerous times, posing as a merchant. He knew the layout of the mansion fairly well. In fact, he had managed over the years to gain entry to just about every major

room in the mansion. Of course, there was one room that he was never allowed to enter. It was through no great feat of intelligence that Fisher knew his destination within the mansion. The question was how to enter the forbidden room without being caught. If he were apprehended, Lord Chenowith would be extremely irate. He would demand justice from either the new court system or from Emperor Marak. Either way, the Torak would find out, and Marak would be forced to punish Fisher. The spy knew that the Emperor would have to demand an execution in order to salve Lord Chenowith's fury.

Dying to save Khadora did not trouble Fisher. He already assumed that he was near the end of his days, and he believed in the cause he was fighting for. What troubled the spy was the impact that his death would have on Marak. The Torak would undoubtedly blame himself for Fisher's death, and that Fisher could not allow. To alleviate the problem, Fisher had brought poison with him. He had vowed to swallow that poison if he was captured during this mission. He was confident that he would not be recognized by Lord Chenowith or anyone else on the estate. His body would be buried, and Marak would never hear of it.

Fisher exited the field and walked along the path that led to the mansion. The moon was bright, but the grounds of the estate were quiet. For a large clan, the army presence on the estate at night was minimal. Of course, the current political climate in Khadora did not require a large security force for protection from your neighbors, but Fisher had expected to see more soldiers. The lack of patrols began to disturb him as he neared the mansion.

When Fisher rounded the rear of the mansion, he stopped and stared at the reason for the lack of patrols. The grounds were a mess. Cut trees dotted the landscape, and dozens of new wooden huts were in various stages of completion. At first Fisher was confused, but then he remembered hearing about the Sakovan resettlement program. Evidently, Lord Chenowith had his army working all day to create homes for the Sakovans. His appreciation for the man soared.

"Kind of amazing isn't it?" came the female voice behind him.

Fisher spun and saw a beautiful young woman leaning out of a window of the mansion.

"It is amazing," nodded Fisher. "It is heartwarming to know that Khadora has such a lord. When will the Sakovans arrive?"

"Not sure," replied the woman. "Lord Chenowith wants the huts completed as soon as possible in case the war breaks out in Khadora. You guys are great for the way you are working. I am surprised to find you still awake after working all day. How do you do it?"

"I didn't work on it today," shrugged Fisher. "I am just in from the city."

“Oh,” smiled the woman. “Has my father come home?”

Fisher frowned as he tried to figure out what the woman was talking about. He wanted to ask who her father was, but he didn’t dare. Her father could be an important officer, or even the seneschal, which any Walkan soldier would recognize.

“I came alone,” he finally answered.

“Oh,” frowned the woman. “Since he was elected to the Lords’ Council, I hardly get to see him any more.”

Fisher swallowed hard as he realized that he was talking to Lord Chenowith’s daughter, but he also realized that Lord Chenowith was not in residence.

“Well, I should be moving along,” Fisher said anxiously.

“Do you want some tea?” asked the woman. “I don’t seem to be able to sleep tonight, and someone to talk to would be nice.”

Fisher could not refuse. To do so would be an insult to the lord’s family. He nodded his head, and the woman smiled.

“I will unlock the back door for you,” offered the woman just before she disappeared.

Fisher debated making a run for it, but he really wanted the information from Bagora’s journal, and he would never get another chance. He walked to the rear door of the mansion and entered. Thankfully, the woman had only lit one torch in the kitchen, so the lighting remained dim enough for her to confuse the uniform with a Walkan one. The woman set two cups of tea on the table and settled into one of the chairs. Fisher slid into the other chair and smiled.

“You are a quiet one, aren’t you?” smiled the woman. “What is your name?”

“Some of my friends call me Scarab,” shrugged Fisher.

“And I thought Elly was a bad name,” chuckled the woman. “Where did you get a name like Scarab?”

“Elly is a fine name,” smiled Fisher. “How could you think it is bad?”

“Do you really think so?” she asked.

“I do,” smiled Fisher as he rose. “I have to attend to something right away. I guess this tea filled me up. Will you wait here for me?”

“Sure,” smiled Elly. “I will make some fresh tea. This pot is a little stale.”

“That’s great,” smiled Fisher as he slipped out of the kitchen.

He walked to the back door of the mansion and opened and closed it without passing through it. He quietly moved along the corridor until he came to Bagora’s room. The door was locked. He swiftly removed a strip of metal from his belt and worked the lock. The click sounded tremendously loud in the silence of the mansion. He opened the door and slipped into the room and closed the door.

He dared not light a torch in the room, but the moon was just past full, and moonlight flooded in the window. He walked to a corner of the room where several metal boxes were placed in a row. He saw one that had been broken open and immediately moved towards it. He opened the box and peered at the papers inside. There were more than he had anticipated. Knowing that he did not have time to find the proper papers, Fisher grabbed them all and put them in his pack. He closed the box and moved swiftly to the door. He slowly opened the door and eased into the corridor. Fisher moved to the back door of the mansion and opened and closed it again. He smiled as he walked into the kitchen and sat down.

"I thought you got lost," commented Elly. "Here is a fresh cup of tea."

"Thank you," smiled Fisher. "I probably should be getting to bed soon. Won't the tea keep you awake?"

"Not really," shrugged Elly, "but I should go to bed soon, too. Father probably wouldn't like to see me up this late. He worries that I will get sick. You know how fathers can be sometimes, even if you are old enough to marry."

"I sure do," Fisher lied. "I enjoyed talking to you. Maybe I will sneak back some night and do it again."

"That would be fun," grinned Elly. "Come earlier next time."

Elly let Fisher out the back door and then locked it. He was just about to round the corner of the mansion when he heard the horses riding in from the road beyond the estate.

"It sounds like father has arrived," Elly smiled as she stuck her head out of the window. "Good night, Scarab."

"Good night, Elly," smiled Fisher.

The spy moved around the corner of the mansion and hugged the building, hoping that none of the soldiers escorting the lord would come around to the rear of the mansion. He remained frozen for what seemed an eternity, but the estate finally returned to silence. Fisher walked calmly in the open until he reached the fields. Once he was concealed, he ran as if his life depended upon his speed.

Chapter 7

Supply Depot

The dragon circled over the half-destroyed city, the early morning light casting long shadows from the few buildings left standing. Most of the wooden structures in Duran had been burned to the ground during the earlier Motangan invasion, but the stone structures were still intact. It was in the stone structures that the soldiers slept and the perishables were kept. The rest of Duran consisted of piles of burnt debris and crates of supplies waiting to be picked up and ferried to the invading armies. The Torak gazed down on the enemy supply depot and searched for signs of sentries. He saw none.

"They are not early risers," Emperor Marak declared. "We need to find the mage first. I do not want word of the attack to reach the Island of Darkness."

"Can Myka get us down there without being seen or heard?" asked the Star of Sakova.

"Just give the word," replied the dragon. "I can glide along the base of the Wall of Mermidion. Any sentries awake would be more likely to keep a close eye on the sea."

"Let's do it," urged the Torak. "I prefer to be on the ground before they wake up."

"Hmmph," snorted the dragon. "Some day you will eat those words. There is no better place to command a battle than on the back of a winged warrior."

"I will stay with Myka," volunteered Lyra. "I have no reason for close contact with the enemy. You flush them out into the open, Marak, and I will deal with them."

"The Star of Sakova understands," grinned the dragon as she quietly touched down at the base of the cliffs. "Enter the rat holes and chase out the prey, Torak. We will be waiting above you."

Marak slid off the dragon without comment. He did not bother to turn around and watch the dragon leap into the air. He pulled the Sword of Torak from its sheath and headed for the first stone building.

The first stone building was a mill, and Marak approached with his long, black, sinuous blade held before him. He peered through the window and saw two Motangan soldiers sleeping. Silently he made his way to the door and crept into the small building. His eyes swept the dark corners of the room before moving to stand over the two Motangans. His first swing decapitated one of the sleeping soldiers.

The other soldier woke as blood splattered onto his body, but Marak drove the Sword of Torak through the man's heart before the Motangan realized what was happening. The Torak moved on.

Stone buildings dotted the old city. Some of them used to house smiths and trade shops, but one was much larger than the rest. It was the headquarters of the Imperial Guards. The building was the most likely place to find the mage, but it was also where Marak was apt to find a large concentration of enemy soldiers. He moved cautiously to a window and peered inside.

The room had piles of cloth covering crates, which were stacked half way to the ceiling. Marak could not see any Motangans in the room. Sheathing his sword, the Torak climbed in the window and quietly lowered himself to the floor. He padded softly to the door and eased it open. Beyond the door was a large entry foyer with several soldiers sleeping on the floor. A number of other doors lined the opposite wall, and there was a staircase leading to the next level. Marak frowned at the possibility of finding the mage without waking any of the soldiers, but he had to try. Maintaining the secrecy surrounding Duran was vital to his plans.

Marak slid out of the room and closed the door. He moved silently to the stairs and slowly started climbing them. He was half way up the stairs when movement on the upper floor caught his eye. He froze.

Marak saw the swirl of a black cloak as the mage closed a door and locked it. The Torak slowly and silently took several Sakovan stars from his pouch as he waited for the mage to move towards the top of the stairs where he would get a decent shot at him.

"Intruder!" shouted a voice behind Emperor Marak.

The Torak whirled around and saw a soldier drawing his sword. The other five soldiers were quickly leaving their slumber behind and scrambling to their feet. Sounds of cursing and running were audible over his head, and Marak knew that it was time to leave the building as quickly as he could.

The Torak raced down the stairs, the first Sakovan star already sailing through the air. It impacted the shouting soldier just above the nose, the man teetering slightly before falling to the floor. Two other soldiers were already to their feet and drawing their swords. Marak sent two Sakovan stars flying towards the men. He struck one Motangan in the forehead, but the other man had moved too quickly.

Marak drew his sword as he raced for the front door of the building. He wanted to look over his shoulder to see who was coming after him, but he could not afford to with four soldiers before him. He charged directly at the man who already was armed. The Motangan tensed and took a defensive stance, his sword held before him. Marak

jogged to one side at the last minute, swinging his long two-handed sword at the Motangan. The enemy's sword clattered to the floor, with the man's hand still gripping the hilt.

The Torak charged into another man who was fumbling for his sword. He knocked the soldier over and raced out the front door. Once out of the building, the Torak immediately moved to the right so that he was not visible to the mage. He heard someone shouting instructions to the soldiers and figured that it was either an officer or the mage. He wasn't sure which, but the orders made up Marak's mind as to how to proceed with the battle. They wanted him alive.

There was a large plaza across from the building with a well in the center of it, and Marak raced towards it. There were soldiers pouring out of buildings everywhere he looked. Marak stopped in the center of the plaza and leaned his sword against the well. He stood with his naked hands in plain view as soldiers poured out of the headquarters building.

None of the soldiers were in a hurry to attack Marak. In fact, none of them entered the plaza. They surrounded the plaza and drew their swords, waiting for the command to attack. The Torak turned slowly as he memorized the position of the groups surrounding him. Marak heard loud arguing coming from the headquarters building, and he tried to hear what was being said. A moment later, two men emerged from the building. One was an officer, and the other was the black-cloaked mage.

"Because we must know how he got here," yelled the mage. "Have you no sense at all? Duran is supposed to be inaccessible from the land. Do you see any boats in the harbor?"

"My men are quite capable of attacking and defeating him without killing him," argued the officer. "All you had to do was ask properly. You do not give orders to my men. I do."

Suddenly, the air rippled in front of the mage. One moment the mage was opening his mouth to yell at the officer, the next moment his head exploded in a fine red mist. The Torak was surprised by Lyra's spell, but he did not need to wait for an invitation to join the battle. He immediately tossed a ball of light at the soldiers crowded at the front of the building. The ball of light instantly flattened, and blades of light grew out of it as it sailed into the group of men. The blades sliced into the men, body parts flying through the air.

Marak swiveled to strike another group to his right, but they were already dead, their charred bodies sending spirals of smoke into the air. The whole plaza had erupted with confusion. The Torak turned rapidly to search for the other large group that had been behind him, but the soldiers were running away from the plaza. As Marak continued his turn, he saw the reason for the soldiers running away.

Myka soared overhead, a Motangan soldier screaming in each claw. Fire spit out of her snout in a long searing streak. On the dragon's back, Lyra was tossing fireballs with one hand and force bolts with the other.

"Grab your sword, Torak," taunted Myka as she dropped the bodies of the Motangan soldiers. "You will miss all the fun if you just stand there. Flush them out for me."

The dragon flew after a large group of Motangans that were heading for the sea. Marak grabbed his sword as he saw two Motangans duck into the blacksmith shop. He ran after them.

For the next two hours, the Torak methodically checked every building in the city while Lyra and Myka hovered overhead. A few of the soldiers put up a fight when discovered in their hiding places, but most of them tried to run away. Lyra and Myka caught them all.

When the last building was checked, Marak returned to the plaza and sat with his back to the well. He was cleaning his sword when Myka landed, and Lyra slid off of the dragon's back.

"What an amazing creature," Lyra said as she sat down next to Marak. "Are you alright?"

"I am fine," nodded Marak. "The two of you were great today. I don't mind telling you that I had my doubts about coming here while I was in the plaza surrounded by the Motangans. There was certainly more than a corte of troops here."

"This was just practice," snorted Myka. "Sort of like playing hide the Motangan. In a real battle you don't get to eliminate the enemy in small groups."

"I will keep that in mind," Marak replied dryly.

"I felt indestructible up there today," grinned Lyra. "What a way to fight the enemy!"

"There was only one mage against you today," warned Marak, "and no archers. Do not ever feel indestructible. There is no such thing."

"The blue cylinder spell protects me completely," countered Lyra. "I know of nothing that can penetrate it."

"Who knows what another mage can do?" shrugged the Torak. "Besides, you cannot hold that spell forever."

"What is bothering you, Marak," frowned Lyra. "Is it that Myka and I killed more Motangans than you?"

"No," sighed the Torak. "You two did great. I wouldn't have survived today without both of you. I think that is what is bothering me. Halman and Gunta have become quite angry with me since I have been riding Myka. They feel that I am exposing myself too much without them around to protect me."

"And they think I am incapable of protecting you?" snorted Myka.

“Ridiculous.”

“That’s not the point, Myka,” replied Lyra. “I know what Marak is talking about. My people are the same. They constantly offer up their own lives to protect me. That is quite a sacrifice for anyone to make, and it hurts when they find out that it is not needed.”

“But those two always protect the Torak,” frowned Myka. “They are even called his shadows, but must they be with him every minute?”

“They worry for his safety as a mother worries for her child,” explained Lyra. “Can you imagine that, Myka?”

Myka did not reply, and Lyra turned to look at the dragon. Tears were clearly visible in Myka’s eyes, and Lyra bit her lower lip with anguish. She had not imagined that Myka might have been a mother, but it was clear from her reaction that she had been.

“I am sorry, Myka,” Lyra said softly. “I didn’t know. What happened?”

“I am going to check on the fishermen,” Myka said abruptly. “I will be back soon.”

The dragon leaped into the air and flew out to sea.

“She lost a child?” asked Marak.

“Apparently so,” nodded Lyra. “The hurt is still strong enough that she does not wish to discuss it.”

“I am sorry for my attitude,” apologized the Torak. “I am glad that you demanded to come today, otherwise I might really have made Halman and Gunta unhappy.”

“So you felt vulnerable today?” asked Lyra. “Is that it? Because if that is all that it is, it was a great day indeed. We both must remember the feeling of vulnerability. Kaltara may favor us, but we are not Kaltara. We must never forget that. Any of us can die at any moment, even though we are asked not to fear death.”

“It is not death that scares me,” replied the Torak. “It is the prospect of leaving my work undone. Still, I cannot afford to become too cautious. What Kaltara expects of me will require me to risk my life many times before this is done. I have come to terms with that.”

“You have done well so far,” smiled Lyra. “Without your efforts, none of us would have been ready for this invasion. Keep doing what you have been doing. It will all work out.”

“We are hardly ready for the invasion,” replied Marak. “We are better prepared than we were before, but we know so little about the Motangans.”

“True,” nodded Lyra. “What are we to do about Duran? I mean after we steal their supplies? Won’t they just bring more supplies in here?”

“They might,” Marak answered, “but I have planned a surprise for

them. I have brought poison with me. Whatever your fishermen do not take, we will poison."

"Clever," nodded Lyra. "The Motangans will soon learn to be suspicious of everything. StarWind arranged to leave barrels of ale in Alamar when we retreated. It is no small wonder that the Motangans did not chase us last night."

"That was smart," chuckled Emperor Marak. "You have good people, Lyra. Look, Myka is returning. The fishermen can not be too far off."

"We do not have to wait here for the ships to arrive," offered the Star of Sakova. "Those ships are huge. Myka would have no problem landing on one."

"That suits me well," nodded the Torak. "Time is valuable right now. The invasion fleets are on their way to Khadora and Fakara. I need to talk to your skimmer pilot to find out what happened with Doralin's fleet and then I will return you to Breele."

"Return me to the edge of the Sakovan heartland," replied Lyra. "We expected the Motangans to attack at dawn. My people will not put up much of a fight until we are in the forests. For now we will retreat each time they engage us."

* * *

"We can rest here," declared StarWind as they reached the crest of a small hill. "We do not want to lose the Motangans."

The Sakovans dismounted and immediately started to set up a temporary camp. Campfires were started and sentries were selected, although there was little need for sentries. The terrain west of Breele was mostly meadows and gradually rose in elevation as one got closer to the heartland. From their current vantage point, the Sakovans could see the Motangan vanguard in the distance. The sea of red uniforms stretched out as far as the Sakovans could see.

"They must know that we are baiting them," HawkShadow said to StarWind. "Every time we get some ground between us, we start up the fires and have a meal, and they keep marching until they reach us. They are not fools."

"I do not take them for fools, HawkShadow," replied the spymaster. "Yes, they know that we are baiting them, but it doesn't matter to them. They will keep coming after us until we are all dead. They do not need to hurry."

"But we are mounted," frowned HawkShadow, "and they are not. We could run rings around them. How do they ever plan to catch us?"

"I am sure that they have strategies worked out for that," replied StarWind, "but I will not pretend to know what they are. I can make guesses though. They have many more men than we do. They can afford to spread out as they pursue us. They can also break off armies

that will not be seen by us, because we are watching this big red horde out there. Sure, we have speed on them, but where are we going to go? They plan to conquer the entire landmass. There will be no hiding place for us."

"StarWind is right," interjected General Didyk. "They can slowly follow us to the west coast, or the south coast, or the Kalatung Mountains, but they will eventually surround us and kill us. Even if we cross the mountains into Khadora, they will follow us. Worse, their armies in Khadora will probably be waiting for us."

"But we can continually attack them and run," argued HawkShadow.

"We can," agreed General Didyk, "and I suspect that they expect us to do just that. They look forward to each and every encounter with us, whether it is initiated by them or us. That is the strategy for fighting when you have such vast numerical superiority. They can easily afford to trade us man for man. They will still have a huge army left when we are all dead."

"I have no intention of trading warriors with them," scoffed HawkShadow. "At least not on an even basis. We will hit and run, but the results will not be to their liking."

"On that we agree," grinned StarWind. "Come sit with me and go over this map, HawkShadow. You know the heartland better than anyone alive. Give me your ideas on where we should stage our actions."

General Didyk left the couple and strode across the makeshift campsite. He saw a small group of Sakovans sitting quietly and approached them.

"I heard about the loss of your friend, SilverEdge," the general said. "I wanted to let you know that I share your grief of his loss. Not too long ago, we were enemies, but I have grown to admire you people. I heard about your heroic stand in Alamar to make sure that the mages and General Manitow got out safely. You have earned the respect of me and my men."

"Thank you, General," nodded Goral as Didyk walked away.

"One would think that defeating him in war would have already earned his respect," snapped SkyDancer.

"That is uncalled for," chided DarkBlade. "While he may not have known SilverEdge personally, I think his sorrow was genuine."

"Many Imperial Guards also died in Alamar," added StormSong. "Have you told their friends how sorry you are for their loss?"

"I didn't ask for his sorrow," spat SkyDancer as she rose and stormed off.

"What is wrong with her?" frowned StormSong. "You would think that the Omungans are still our enemies by her attitude."

“She fears losing those who are close to her,” shrugged DarkBlade.

“Don’t we all?” asked StormSong. “We all loved SilverEdge. Why is her burden so much greater than ours?”

“It is more than the loss of SilverEdge that bothers her,” Goral said softly. “She mourns for the future losses as well as the past.”

StormSong frowned at Goral and shook her head. “Now I know why you don’t talk much, Goral,” she said. “When you do open your mouth, nothing understandable comes out.”

Goral shrugged but did not reply. StormSong sighed with exasperation and strode off towards the campfire. DarkBlade sat next to Goral and began to sharpen his sword.

“What did you mean by that, Goral?” he asked. “What exactly does SkyDancer fear?”

“SkyDancer is in love,” Goral said softly. “SilverEdge’s death showed her just how fragile life is these days. She fears losing the object of her love to this war. That makes her hate this war very much.”

“She thinks that HawkShadow is going to die?” questioned DarkBlade.

“What do I know?” replied the giant. “You should ask SkyDancer about her feelings.”

“I know you well enough, Goral,” chuckled DarkBlade. “I don’t buy the stupid giant routine at all. Others may think that you are slow, and you may enjoy them thinking that, but I know better. Does she think that HawkShadow is going to die?”

“She fears losing HawkShadow,” nodded Goral, “whether it is through death or some other means does not make much of a difference to her. The end result is the same.”

“We all may die before this over,” shrugged DarkBlade. “If she truly feels that strongly about HawkShadow, she should be spending every single moment with him while they are both alive.”

“She would not argue that point with you,” replied Goral. “Nor would I. When they are together is the only time that she smiles.”

“Where is HawkShadow?” asked DarkBlade. “I know I saw him earlier today.”

Goral nodded towards the spot where the assassin sat reading the map with StarWind. DarkBlade saw the couple sitting and frowned. Without a word to Goral, DarkBlade turned and strode over to HawkShadow.

“Tayo, HawkShadow,” said DarkBlade. “I think SkyDancer was looking for you.”

“Tayo, DarkBlade,” HawkShadow replied, tearing his eyes away from the map only for a second before returning to it. “Could you tell

her where I am?"

"I think she knows where you are," replied DarkBlade.

HawkShadow frowned in confusion, but StarWind nodded knowingly.

"I think that I have enough to dwell on, HawkShadow" smiled StarWind as she rose and started folding up the map. "Why don't you go rest and enjoy our short stop while you can."

"I would rather finish our discussion," protested HawkShadow.

"Another time," StarWind said definitively as she turned and walked away.

HawkShadow turned and frowned at DarkBlade. "Did I say something wrong to her?" he asked. "Her leaving was rather abrupt."

"No," DarkBlade sighed as he shook his head. "You said nothing wrong. Why don't you go and find SkyDancer. She is feeling pretty low right now. I think you could cheer her up."

"I imagine that she is dwelling on SilverEdge's death," frowned HawkShadow. "She liked him a great deal. His death must hurt her quite a bit."

"Something like that," replied DarkBlade. "Losing you would hurt her a lot more. Go and spend some time with her."

HawkShadow nodded and strode off. A feeling of satisfaction filled DarkBlade as he watched the assassin walk away.

"You should not have done that," came a voice from behind DarkBlade.

DarkBlade whirled to see MistyTrail standing behind him. "Why not?" he asked. "She needs him right now. She loves him."

"You do not understand HawkShadow as I do," frowned MistyTrail. "You may just have endangered his life."

"What?" balked DarkBlade. "What a nonsensical thing to say. By telling him that SkyDancer loves him? Surely, he must already know that?"

"He knows that she loves him," nodded MistyTrail. "She has said so to him, but he does not feel the same towards her. He likes her a great deal, but his heart belongs to another."

"Who?" asked DarkBlade.

"That does not matter," replied MistyTrail. "Like SkyDancer, HawkShadow's love is not returned by the woman he loves."

"Then he should tell SkyDancer the truth and let her deal with it," retorted DarkBlade.

"She is incapable of dealing with it," countered MistyTrail. "That is why HawkShadow says nothing. He will not lie to her, yet he will not destroy her with the truth either."

"Well," shrugged DarkBlade, "that is his prerogative, but I don't see how that endangers his life."

“No,” replied MistyTrail, “the mention of love does not endanger him, but your insistence that she needs him does. It tells HawkShadow that SkyDancer has become unstable. He can handle her love of him, but he also is responsible for sending her on missions. Now he must second-guess every assignment that he gives her. Few know HawkShadow as I do. I spent years with him as my tutor. I know him well.”

“Which means what?” asked DarkBlade.

“Which means that HawkShadow will try to do her work as well as his own to protect her,” answered MistyTrail. “He could not bear the responsibility of her death if he sent her on a mission that she was incapable of handling, and in her state of mind, that would be any mission that he gave her.”

“Then he should talk to Lyra,” frowned DarkBlade. “Get her removed from working under him. You could take her place. You just said that he tutored you for years.”

“My time in the Sakova is at an end,” MistyTrail said. “I must return to Elvangar. In fact, I am hoping to meet Myka when she returns with the Star of Sakova. She could take me home.”

“Then I will speak to Lyra,” decided DarkBlade. “I did not mean to cause trouble. I was only trying to help.”

“I understand,” MistyTrail smiled tautly. “Talk to Lyra about it. I am sure she will understand.”

Chapter 8

Hand of Kaltara

Premer Cardijja marched down the gangplank and watched as thousands upon thousands of Motangan soldiers marched through the newly built city of Meliban. The first troops to be offloaded were ordered to march completely through the city. Once outside the walls, they began setting up camp. The premer walked to the city center to observe the troop movements. As generals unloaded their armies, they made their way to the premer for instructions. General Luggar arrived in a huff.

"I caught some men preparing to burn buildings," the general scowled. "Is that an order that you gave?"

"Absolutely not," frowned the premer. "There is no reason to destroy this city. It will make an excellent port for receiving supplies. Have those soldiers executed in front of the men still disembarking. Make sure that the message is spread that I will not tolerate unnecessary destruction. We were fortunate to have landed unopposed. This city in now Motangan."

"What about use of the buildings?" asked General Luggar. "May we take them over for our own use?"

"Yes," nodded the premer. "I will assign sectors to the generals. The generals can utilize the buildings as they see fit. The administration building down the street will be reserved for me and my staff."

"You sound as if we are going to be here for a while," commented the general. "What is our plan of attack?"

"The first step is to get situated here," answered Premer Cardijja. "We will send out scouts from the mounted corte to search for clues as to the whereabouts of the enemy. Then we will kill the Fakarans."

"You make it sound so simple," replied the general. "What about Vandegar and Angragar?"

"Those problems belong to Premer Tzargo," shrugged Cardijja. "It is my understanding that Tzargo is in charge of securing Vandegar for the Emperor. Once Vand is installed in the temple, the search for Angragar will begin in earnest. Of course," he added, "it would be quite an accomplishment if we can determine the location of Angragar before Tzargo. I might even be promoted to First Premer. Keep that in mind when we engage the Fakarans. Any captives must be interrogated painstakingly."

“Tzargo only has fifty thousand men,” frowned General Luggar. “Can he hold Vandegar with that small an army?”

“He has more mages than he knows what to do with,” shrugged Cardijja. “What he lacks in manpower, he makes up for with magic.”

“When does he arrive?” asked the general.

“After we have secured Meliban and located the enemy,” answered the premer. “While he can defend Vandegar, he doesn’t want to be attacked on the way there.”

“So he is waiting on us,” frowned the general. “I don’t care to have that kind of attention on me. I prefer a slow and steady approach.”

“That is why I brought a corte of cavalry with me,” replied the premer. “Fakara is a large wasteland and I don’t want to waste time locating the Fakarans. I have also arranged to have more horses shipped if we need them, but I don’t think that will be necessary just yet. Our trackers are excellent. We will find the Fakarans in a short time.”

“Or they will find us,” warned the general.

“Let them come,” smiled the premer. “That would make this much easier. Our archers are the finest in Motanga. Why do you think I chose Fakara? The land is mostly flat. You can see forever on these plains. Let the savages charge us. They will fall to our archers before they ever reach us.”

* * *

General Chen watched as Premer Shamal shouted angrily at the junior officer. The general knew that the premer rarely lost his temper. Carefully placing his feet to avoid stumbling while the ship rocked in the heavy swells, General Chen made his way to the rail alongside the premer.

“Still no word from Clarvoy?” asked the general.

“No,” scowled the premer, “and I am getting tired of waiting. Soldiers are not meant to sit on unmoving ships waiting for the war to begin. If he was not sure about the defenses of Khadora, he should have accepted our waiting in Sudamar instead of the middle of the ocean. Half of the men are seasick with the foul waves rocking these ships. I am quite tempted to attack without his information.”

“That could be costly,” warned the general. “Khadora is the best defended of our enemies. It is important to know what we are up against.”

“Khadora will be no easy task,” agreed Premer Shamal, “which is why I wanted it. I am the only premer qualified to handle it, as I have studied the Khadorans at length. Their armies are experienced fighters unlike the Omungans and Fakarans, but that is why we have a hundred thousand more men than the others. As much as the

information about defenses would help us, getting my men off these ships will also help us. We are in greater danger out here than we will be in Raven's Point."

"Perhaps we will hear from Clarvoy today," General Chen said hopefully.

"We had better," scowled the premer. "If we do not hear from him today, I am giving the order to attack regardless. We can take Raven's Point and hold there until Clarvoy gathers the information that we need."

"Emperor Vand will not be happy with such a decision," frowned General Chen.

"The Emperor has given me control over this force," retorted Premer Shamal. "The decision is mine to make. What you generals are unaware of," he continued softly, "is that Doralin's fleet was attacked at sea. His losses were not insignificant. While I am not afraid of such a tactic coming from the Khadorans, we are still at risk upon the sea. Look around you, Chen. There are four hundred ships out here. Even a storm could cause great damage to our armies. We cannot afford to stay here much longer. One more day and I will give the order to proceed."

"I had not heard about Doralin's misfortune," frowned General Chen. "How did it happen, and why do you think the Khadorans would not try the same thing?"

"The Sakovans attacked his fleet with hundreds of small ships," answered the premer. "The small boats had some type of deadly harpoons that pierced the hulls of Doralin's ships. Each ship that went down cost a thousand men. As for that happening to us, Khadora really has only one port on this coast, and that is Raven's Point. Not only are there not a hundred ships in Raven's Point, there are none with weapons attached to them. Besides, I have instructed the ship captains to sink any vessel approaching the fleet. Doralin's people thought they were fishing boats and let them get too close."

"You were wise to hide this from the men," replied General Chen. "While our armies have the courage to face death in battle, sitting here exposed would have terrified them if they had known what had happened to Doralin. Your decision to go ahead with the attack makes perfect sense now."

"Do not spread word of this until we make landfall, Chen," warned the premer. "I have only shared this with you because I value your advice. You are the finest general in the Motangan army."

* * *

The Khadoran bursar was finely attired in silk garments of the white and black colors of the Devon clan. He perused the merchandise only at the most expensive stalls in the marketplace of Khadoratung,

and he did so at a leisurely pace. So it was of no surprise that the bursar would end up at the stall of an exclusive merchant situated in the middle of the last row. The merchant, Wendal, immediately sized up the bursar and watched with interest as the man approached.

"Good day to you," greeted Wendal. "Looking for something in particular?"

"As a matter of fact I am," nodded the bursar as he placed a large pouch on the table.

The jingle of gold was unmistakable to the merchant as the pouch hit the table. Wendal smiled broadly.

"What do you require?" Wendal asked.

"I am interest in BaGrec," smiled he bursar.

"The finest artisan to have ever lived," nodded Wendal. "His pieces are in great demand since he died. What piece are you looking for?"

"The three-legged horse sculpture," smiled the bursar.

The merchant's eyes immediately shifted left and right as he scanned the walkways around his stall. He deftly reached out and snared the pouch of gold. He hefted it as if to measure its worth before tucking it under his tunic.

"What would you like to know?" Wendal asked softly.

"Anything and everything about the coming invasion," declared the bursar. "I am particularly curious about the recent buildings going up around the city."

"It seems that Sakovan citizens are being relocated here," replied Wendal. "Many have already arrived, but I understand that thousands are coming in the near future. Whole Sakovan cities are being emptied of the women and children."

"What of the men?" asked the bursar.

"Only old men are arriving," answered Wendal. "The fit have remained behind to fight the invaders."

"And why are Khadoran soldiers working on the buildings?" prompted the bursar. "Where are the laborers?"

"They are far to the east," replied Wendal. "They are building great trenches."

"Trenches?" frowned the bursar. "Where and what for?"

"BaGrec's works have become very expensive these days," smiled Wendal. "They are in great demand."

The bursar frowned heavily, but he placed another pouch on the table, which was immediately swept away by Wendal.

"The trenches are a feat that will be spoken about for years to come," smiled Wendal. "They stretch for many leagues and are designed to impede the advance of the invaders. It is said that a man cannot jump them for they are too wide, but a horse can leap them

easily."

"Where exactly are they located?" asked the bursar.

"There are three that I know of," replied the merchant. "They are concentric rings between the coast and the Khadora and Lituk Rivers. It is said that they run from the Kalatung Mountains clear to the Fortung Mountains."

"What about roads across them?" asked the bursar. "Surely they have made places where wagons can pass over the trenches? Many estates would be isolated without some type of bridge."

"There are three," nodded the merchant, "but they will be destroyed if the enemy gets close. There is one near each end of the arc and one in the middle. An enemy that seized one of those bridges could entirely defeat the purpose of the trenches. It would be a shame to see such work go to waste."

"What of the defenses at Raven's Point?" asked the bursar.

"Those defense plans have been kept well guarded," frowned Wendal, "but there have been observations that offer clues to what might happen. Of course, if there is an invasion, the value of BaGrec's works will soar in value."

"Enough," the bursar said in a threatening tone as he placed another pouch of gold on the table.

Wendal smiled broadly as he swept the pouch away. "Thousands of mages are reported to be along the coast," declared the merchant. "Practically every mage in Khadora is out there. The armies of the Imperial Valley are also on the move. Reports speak about traveling far to the east, but not all the way to the coast."

"Held in reserve to defend a retreat?" frowned the bursar.

"I am not a military man," shrugged Wendal, "but that would be my guess. It is curious that these troops are traveling so far, and yet the frontier troops have not been ordered to move at all. Especially since many of them are much closer to Raven's Point."

"That is curious," admitted the bursar. "How solid is that information?"

"Very solid," assured Wendal. "We get many visitors here in Khadoratung. Every frontier clan has been told to remain at home."

"So the first line of defense is merely the coastal clans?" mused the bursar. "That sounds negligent."

"Unless the mages plan some type of devastation of their own," shrugged Wendal. "You do know that the mages have been schooled in battle magic?"

"I have heard," nodded the bursar. "One last question. Where is the Emperor in all of this planning?"

"Of that I know little," admitted Wendal. "I will venture a guess, but it is only a guess. Emperor Marak is known as the ultimate warrior

by the Khadoran clans. I would expect him to be where the fighting is. He is not the type of Emperor to sit here in Khadoratung while the battle is raging elsewhere."

The bursar nodded his head and left the stall. Only the most thorough observer would notice the man's slight deformity. His left palm faced slightly forward when his arm was at his side.

The bursar of the Devon clan left the marketplace and entered the Wine Press Inn. He stood inside the door and scanned the common room before moving to take the seat in the far corner of the room. The bursar had not been sitting long before a black-cloaked man entered the common room. The new comer marched across the room and slid along the bench to sit right next to the bursar.

"Would you mind sitting elsewhere?" asked the bursar. "There are plenty of open seats available. I wish to be alone for my meal. I have much on my mind."

"Actually," said the black-cloaked man, "I was hoping to talk to you during the meal. I have something that might be of interest to the Devon clan."

The innkeeper appeared to take the meal orders, and the black-cloaked man ordered two special wasooki steak meals and a bottle of expensive wine. The innkeeper smiled broadly, and the bursar frowned in confusion, but he nodded his acceptance.

"What is of so much interest to the Devon clan that you must disturb my meal?" asked the bursar after the innkeeper had left.

"The Devon clan no longer exists," smiled the hooded man. "They were wiped out by the Vessi during the Jiadin invasion. I would not have expected the great Clarvoy to be so ignorant of such a thing, but then your mind is more on future events these days."

The facial expressions of the bursar changed rapidly. First came concern, and then fear. The fear changed to determination, but quickly succumbed to disbelief, and finally to pain and shock. His hand rose threateningly as he turned to stare at the man next to him, but it dropped limp by his side a second later.

"A pity that you must leave us so quickly," the hooded man said softly. "I would have loved to interrogate you, but I dare not take the chance against your magic."

The hooded man calmly slid along the bench and stood. He left the poisoned knife sticking in the bursar's side and moved nonchalantly out of the inn as Clarvoy's head fell to the table before him, his eyes wide open in the stare of death.

Outside the inn, the hooded man slipped into the alley alongside the building. After checking the alley to make sure that no one was around, he stripped off the black cloak and stuffed it in his pack. Before the first shout of murder emanated from the Wine Press Inn,

Fisher was dressed in an Imperial Guard uniform. He moved out of the alley and quickly responded to the call for help.

* * *

The fleet of skimmers rose and fell on the heavy swells, salt spray covering the two sailors in each craft. Kruffel, a crusty old fisherman from the Fakaran city of Ghala, led the fleet of a hundred small, fast, attack vessels. The heavy seas had been unexpected and had resulted in the force missing an opportunity to attack the Motangans before they unloaded in Meliban. Kruffel was determined to strike a blow against the Motangans, but not by sinking empty ships anchored outside Meliban. He led his group further westward in a relentless dash to reach the Motangan fleet heading for Khadora.

"This is mad, Kruffel," complained his partner. "We have no idea where the Khadora-bound fleet is. You cannot drive these men like this. You will exhaust them."

"They are between here and Raven's Point somewhere, Dasra," retorted Kruffel. "We will find them."

"If any of our men survive," scowled Dasra. "These boats were not built for heavy seas. We have almost lost one already, and the seas are getting worse. Give it up."

"Give it up?" balked Kruffel. "How can you say such a thing? And your being from Raven's Point yourself. It is your home that these Motangans will be invading. How can those words come out of your mouth?"

"If I thought we had any chance of success," replied Dasra, "the words would not have been spoken. This is a hopeless gamble that will only result in the deaths of our men."

"Our men are already dead," snarled Kruffel. "We failed to attack the Fakaran-bound fleet. Three hundred thousand foreigners are already on Fakaran soil. I will not let this opportunity escape us completely."

"It wasn't your fault," Dasra sighed with compassion. "We left port as soon as the word was given. No one expected these heavy seas. Do not blame yourself, and do not kill our men just because the weather conspired against us. It just was not meant to be."

"I should have pressed the men harder," replied Kruffel. "We might have been able to catch the tail end of the Motangan fleet."

"No, Kruffel," Dasra shook his head. "We were far too late for that. There was nothing that you or anyone else could have done. Turn the fleet around and take us home."

"Home is where I am taking you," Kruffel replied defiantly. "We are much closer to Raven's Point than we are to Angragar. You are from Raven's Point, aren't you?"

"I am," Dasra sighed with frustration, "but my home will not exist

by the time we get there. No one expects anything to be left standing in Raven's Point after the Motangans pass through. It will not even be safe for us to land there. Our men will be killed for sure."

"We all understood that we would probably die in this endeavor," shrugged Kruffel. "Death will not be what defeats us. Do not fear it. Failure is what must be feared, for our failure to strike a blow against the Motangans will doom thousands upon thousands of our countrymen. I will not turn back as long as there is any possibility of catching the other Motangan fleet."

"Nor would I," conceded Dasra, "but this is ridiculous. The Motangans would have to have stopped the fleet in the middle of the ocean for us to catch up to them. Why can't you understand that?"

An excited shout from one of the other boats interrupted the discussion. Kruffel waited impatiently for his boat to top the next swell. When his boat finally rose high on the sea, Kruffel swore with excitement.

"Drop your sails," Kruffel shouted loudly to the skimmers around him. "Do not let the Motangans see us. Pass the word on."

"I don't believe it," Dasra said in amazement. "Why would they do such a thing? They are sitting limp in the water. It makes no sense, no sense at all."

"Perhaps there is more to Kaltara than you are willing to admit," grinned Kruffel. "They sure looked like Motangan ships to me. Nothing else is anywhere near that size."

"They are definitely Motangan," agreed Dasra, "but it still makes no sense. Do you really believe in Kaltara?"

"I haven't until now," admitted Kruffel. "Oh, I admit that I get to thinking about it, what with everyone speaking so much about it, but I have had trouble believing in miracles. Now though? It sure is strange that the Motangans stopped and waited for us. It certainly is not something that I would ever have done. It is as if God is intervening to make our lives worthwhile."

"What will we do now?" asked Dasra. "We cannot just sit here with our sails down."

"The Sakovan skimmers got in trouble because they were sighted early," replied Kruffel. "I will not make the same mistake. We will wait until nightfall before attacking."

"What if the Motangans leave before then?" frowned Dasra.

"I reckon that we are still a day out of Raven's Point," answered Kruffel. "Even if the Motangans left right now, we could catch them before they make landfall. We will wait for the darkness. Throw lines to the nearest skimmers. We need to raft together, or we will become too separated without sails to maneuver."

The skimmer rose on another swell, and Kruffel gazed once again

at the Motangan fleet. The four hundred leviathans were only a smear on the horizon without their sails on display, but it was a sight that sent shivers of excitement up his spine.

* * *

The Wound of Kaltara was an enormous gorge through which the Kaltara River flowed. Ancient Sakovan scrolls told the story of its creation over a thousand years ago. It was said to have been blasted out by the hand of God in a fit of rage following the murder of the Star of Sakova. A priest witnessed the event and was sent by God to inform the Sakovan people of Kaltara's displeasure. The priest was given the Scroll of Kaltara to guide the Sakovan people in the rightful ways of the future.

The canyon was over a league wide and half a league deep, and it stretched for hundreds of leagues from west of Zaramilden to the Wytung Mountains. It was a desolate, uninhabited gorge of enormous proportions that travelers avoided. Usually.

On this particular day, there were over a thousand travelers on the floor of the canyon. Heading south towards the Wytung Mountains, a long column stretched along the banks of the Kaltara River. They were unconcerned about being observed by anyone, as the Wound of Kaltara was fairly inaccessible. Nor were they worried about anyone noticing evidence of their passing, as they left no human footprints. The loin-clothed men rode on the backs of large ferocious cats.

Kyata, tribal leader of the Zatong tribe of the Chula, raised his hand in an unspoken command to rest. The Chula warriors silently dismounted their beasts and gathered in small groups to refresh and eat a meal. Ukaro, head shaman of the Zatong tribe, sat next to his brother Kyata.

"Your words about the Wound of Kaltara are true," smiled Kyata. "No one has appeared on the rims of the canyon since we entered it. It is easy traveling and yet unobserved. You have done well."

"The peaks of the Wytung Mountains can likewise be traveled in secrecy," smiled Ukaro, his long mane flowing fluidly as he stretched his neck. "It is along the coast of the sea that I am concerned about. I am not sure where the Motangans might position spotters."

"Perhaps your son could be tempted to fly his winged warrior over the area?" posed Kyata.

"The Torak has much to worry about," Ukaro shook his head. "I will not trouble him for a such a trivial matter. The Chula know how to move unobserved, even if it is in a foreign land unfamiliar to us. We will reach Alamar without giving notice to the invaders."

"Do you have any knowledge of the strength of the enemy in Alamar?" asked Kyata.

“Nothing accurate,” replied the shaman. “We will send scouts before us, but I think that the Motangans would not leave the port city unsecured. They have sufficient men to leave five or ten thousand to guard the city without concern for the troops. Alamar is needed by the Motangans to unload supplies. Without it, they are cut off from their Island of Darkness.”

“Then we shall remove it from their hands,” grinned the chieftain.

Chapter 9

Winds of Change

Kruffel could barely keep his eyes open as he piloted the skimmer westward. He had gone for days with only short naps to refresh his body, and the tension of the battle had drained his energy. The old fisherman turned his head to scan the seas around him in search of any other skimmers that might have survived the battle. Dawn was still hours away, and Kruffel could not see any other ships around them.

Unexpectedly the boat slewed sideways as the swell picked up the skimmer and carried it sideways. Kruffel's eyes jolted open as he fought the tiller to correct his course.

"You are falling asleep," Dasra said groggily as he woke up. "Let me take over for a spell."

"I accept," Kruffel quickly replied. "Check our friend first and see if he is still alive."

Dasra moved to the man that they had fished out of the sea during the attack. The man was a skimmer pilot from a small village in Fakara that neither of the men knew well. His skimmer had been sunk in the heat of the battle, and Kruffel had hauled the man aboard.

"He is still alive," reported Dasra, "but he is burning up. How long to Raven's Point?"

"I have no idea," sighed Kruffel. "I am not sure how long I dozed off for. I am glad that you woke up, although I know you have not had much more sleep than I have. I must rest my eyes at least."

Dasra moved to the stern and grabbed the tiller, allowing Kruffel to move to the bow and close his eyes, but as tired as he was, the old fisherman could not fall asleep right away.

"I cannot get the battle out of my mind," Kruffel said, his eyes still closed. "On one hand I am elated at the number of Motangan ships we sent to the bottom of the sea, but on the other hand I think of all the men we lost. They were brave men, and they will be sorely missed."

"Their lives were not lost in vain," Dasra replied. "I have no idea how many behemoths we sunk, but it was a lot. The losses were certainly large enough to be severely felt by Vand's armies. I can only hope that it will be enough to make a difference in the battles to come."

"I must sleep," Kruffel replied after several moments of silence.

“Wake me if you see any other skimmers.”

* * *

StormSong nudged Lyra, and the Star of Sakova opened her eyes. Lyra sat up and gazed around, but it was too dark to see very far.

“You wanted to be notified when the armies were in position,” StormSong said softly. “We just received word that they are all set. We need to pull back ourselves now. Sorry to wake you.”

“Thank you, StormSong,” smiled Lyra as she rose from the ground. “What time is it?”

“A few hours before dawn,” answered the Sakovan warrior, her voice soft and hushed. “It took longer than expected for the armies to position themselves. They are unfamiliar with the terrain of the heartland.”

“Let’s hope the same can be said for the Motangans,” replied Lyra. “Have they moved at all?”

“Not a bit,” StormSong shook her head. “They have not even sent out scouts this night.”

“After last night,” Lyra said, “I cannot blame them. They must be getting tired of losing men every night with nothing to gain for it. Will there be enough of a trail for the Motangans to follow in the morning? We don’t want them getting lost.”

“We will blaze a trail that even the simplest of trackers can follow,” StormSong assured the Star, “but we need to start doing that now. The people are nervous with you this close to the enemy.”

“Then we shall leave immediately,” promised Lyra, “although we are not that close unless they have moved while I slept. We have caught every one of their scouts in the past. They do not move as quietly as Sakovans.”

“We will take no chances,” shrugged StormSong. “I will gather the others while you get ready.”

Lyra grabbed her pack and put it on. She retrieved her rapier and dusted the dirt off her clothes. She stretched while she waited for StormSong to return with the chokas.

Suddenly, a horrifying scream rent the air. Lyra did not recognize the voice, but it was obviously female. The only female Motangans that anyone had seen were mages, and they were not known to scout out enemy positions. Sakovans emerged out of the darkness and began encircling the Star of Sakova.

“Who was it?” Lyra asked softly.

“HawkShadow and DarkBlade are checking now,” replied StarWind. “StormSong and the others will be along shortly with the chokas.”

Loud growls emanated from the dark forest and were immediately followed by the sound of a struggle. Lyra stared into the darkness as

she listened intently. She saw something large moving, but she could not identify it.

Unexpectedly, light flared in the dark night as LifeTender threw a fireball in the direction that Lyra had been looking. The light illuminated a ten-foot-tall creature that resembled a hairy ape. The fireball slammed into the creature, and it howled hysterically. The creature was soon engulfed in flames, and it illuminated the woods around it.

"There are more of them," shouted SkyDancer as she drew her sword.

"Those must be the kruls that MistyTrail described," Lyra said in shock as she stared at the dozen pairs of illuminated eyes staring at her from the sevemore forest.

HawkShadow and DarkBlade burst into the clearing, their swords dripping blood.

"Get the Star out of here now!" shouted HawkShadow as he took up a fighting stance between Lyra and the creatures in the woods. "It is not safe here."

DarkBlade moved to HawkShadow's side, leaving enough room between them to avoid cramping their fighting space. StormSong and a dozen other Sakovans arrived with chokas. StormSong quickly handed the reins to another Sakovan and drew her sword. She moved forward and took up position on HawkShadow's right just as the creatures charged. Lyra threw a force bolt at one of the charging creatures while several of the Sakovan mages threw fireballs. The force bolt slammed into a krul blowing a hole clear through his body. The creature toppled to the ground as two others burst into flames.

"Move the Star!" DarkBlade shouted angrily. "This is not a fight for her to stay for. There are hundreds of these things in the forest. Get her out of here now!"

StarWind needed no further encouragement. She forcibly picked Lyra up and placed her on the back of a choka. She quickly mounted her own choka and shouted commands.

"LifeTender, Goral, and SkyDancer stay with HawkShadow and the others and fight until we are clear," the spymaster shouted. "The rest of you mount up and form a cordon around the Star. Move now!"

The Sakovans burst into action. Everyone mounted except the six chosen to remain behind and delay the creatures. StarWind started the procession, but the kruls seemed to understand what was going on. They ignored the fighters facing them and raced for Lyra. DarkBlade, StormSong, and HawkShadow leaped forward and engaged the kruls, two-handed swords swinging into the flesh of the creatures.

Goral grabbed his huge maul and raced to head off the kruls. He caught one of them with a swing to its head. The crack resounded

through the forest as the creature's skull burst open. LifeTender and SkyDancer threw fireballs at the kruls closing on Lyra. Two of them burst into flames, but one continued onward.

StarWind turned aside as she waved the others forward. She rode directly towards the lead krul, her sword swinging free from its sheath. The krul tried to run around StarWind, but the choka was much too fast to be avoided. The large warbird ripped into the krul with its sharp claws, while StarWind's sword sliced into the creature's neck. The krul screamed in agony as its bloody body tumbled to the ground.

HawkShadow, StormSong, and DarkBlade attacked the kruls from behind as StarWind's choka turned and raced after Lyra. Goral waded into the still advancing kruls swinging his heavy maul from side to side, while LifeTender and SkyDancer continued to incinerate the creatures with magical spells.

The clearing was lit only by the light of the flaming krul bodies, and long shadows danced across the battlefield. Shadows and kruls seemed almost indistinguishable as more creatures emerged from the trees.

"We are being surrounded," warned HawkShadow as he sliced the legs out from under a krul. "It is time to go."

The four warriors started fighting their way towards the two mages and the chokas. Sevemore cones started popping as the burning kruls littered the forest floor. Unexpectedly, a wounded krul on the floor of the forest reached up and grabbed DarkBlade's leg as the warrior was retreating. DarkBlade swiveled and brought his blade down onto the head of the creature, splitting its skull. As he pulled his leg free of the dying creature's grasp, another krul grabbed DarkBlade's head from behind. The krul viciously twisted its large hands, and DarkBlade's neck snapped. The krul lifted DarkBlade by his head and brought it to its mouth. LifeTender incinerated the krul with a fireball as HawkShadow and StormSong reached the mages. They turned to learn of DarkBlade's fate.

"A fire is starting," SkyDancer warned urgently as she pointed to where a krul's flaming body was wrapped around the base of a sevemore tree.

"Good," snarled StormSong as she glared at DarkBlade's body. "Maybe it will kill these foul creatures."

HawkShadow leaped onto his choka and urged the others to follow suit. The five Sakovans fled from the Motangan creatures as fast as the chokas would carry them. When they had ridden for ten minutes, HawkShadow ordered a halt. He sat listening for any sounds of pursuit.

"Do you think they will follow us?" asked LifeTender. "Tonight, I

mean."

"I do," nodded HawkShadow. "MistyTrail told me a bit about these creatures. When they are unleashed in search of someone, they never stop. They are also quieter in the forest than most humans. That is how they got so close tonight. These kruls are a real problem for us. I fear them more than the whole Motangan army."

"They are animals," added Goral. "They will not be fooled by clever Sakovan tricks. They will track us as an animal tracks its prey."

"They burn well," commented SkyDancer, "although their screams are hideous."

"I would rather hear their screams than ours," retorted StormSong.

"I agree," nodded HawkShadow. "I am about to recommend something that I have spent my life trying to avoid."

"A fire?" questioned SkyDancer. "That will destroy the Sakova. You can't be serious?"

"I think it is brilliant," interjected LifeTender as she gauged the direction of the wind. "The sevemore trees burn hot and fast. The fire will spread faster than the Motangans can run"

"Do you realize what you are saying?" frowned SkyDancer. "The Sakova is our home. You are talking about destroying it. You don't really want to do that."

"Isn't that exactly what we are asking the Omungans to do?" asked Goral. "We want them to burn their farms and cities to deny them to the Motangans. How is this any different?"

"All of the Sakova will not burn," LifeTender explained. "The sevemore trees will burn, but the fargi trees will not. It takes a long sustained fire to burn a fargi tree and that won't happen. The sevemore trees burn much too quickly."

"And the Motangan armies will be caught in it," added Goral. "It is the perfect way to reduce the size of their armies."

"StormSong?" asked HawkShadow. "What do you say?"

StormSong looked at each of her fellow Sakovans before answering. She locked eyes with SkyDancer and saw fear in her friend's face. She knew that a burning forest was every Sakovan's worst nightmare, or it had been until this night.

"Burn it," StormSong replied adamantly.

* * *

Premer Doralin awoke to the shouting. He quickly rose and hurried out of his tent into the predawn darkness. He stood for a moment listening to the shouts coming from the forward most area of the camp. As he stood listening, his nose crinkled with irritation. He inhaled deeply, smelled the smoke, and frowned. General Valatosa was soon by his side.

“What is the matter?” the premer demanded to know.

“The krul are returning,” answered the general. “They are returning in a panic.”

“I thought the smell of smoke was too heavy to be from the campfires,” the premer replied worryingly. “Only one thing truly scares the kruls, and that is a forest fire. The kruls will be unstable. We will need mages to calm them. Find out how severe this forest fire is.”

“The mages are already on their way,” reported General Valatosa. “As for the fire, it is severe. Already the eastern horizon is lightening, and it is not because of the approaching dawn. We are in trouble, Premer. With the current winds, we are in the path of the fire.”

“And if this dawn is similar to the others that we have experienced in the Sakova,” nodded Premer Doralin, “the winds will increase significantly.”

“Exactly,” the general swallowed hard. “We will not escape in time.”

“Do not panic, General,” the premer responded calmly. “We will start an orderly retreat of our rearmost forces. They are to move well west of the edge of the forest. Make sure that it is orderly. I will not tolerate hysteria. I want your army to organize it. Keep a steady flow of men moving out of the forest at all times.”

“What about you?” frowned the general. “I cannot abandon you to die in this forest.”

“I have no intention of dying anytime soon,” the premer said confidently. “I will order the armies around me to begin felling the trees around us and removing them from the area. We will create a firebreak around us. You may personally return here after you have instructed your men.”

The general turned and ran to organize the retreat. The premer shouted orders, and several generals promptly responded. Doralin issued his edicts, and the generals left to carry them out. Within minutes the sounds of felling trees carried on the air. As soon as a sevemore hit the ground, scores of men ran forward to carry it away from the camp. Within an hour the sky lightened considerably as sunlight flooded the sky. Doralin turned slowly measuring the amount of defoliation.

“The evacuation is under way,” reported General Valatosa as he returned from the rear of the camp. “I also sent a man forward to gauge the speed of the firestorm heading for us. I told him to report here.”

“Well done, Valatosa,” smiled the premer. “Now it is merely a race against time. Given six hours, we will be able to avoid the brunt of the storm. If we can survive in this firebreak, we will have fooled

the Sakovans."

"Fooled the Sakovans?" puzzled the general. "What do you mean? Do you think this fire was deliberately set?"

"Of course it was," replied the premer. "The Sakovans continually manage to outwit us. First it was the fishing fleet that sank our ships, and then it was the poisoned rations. Now they hope to chase us out of the forest with this fire. The Sakovans know that they cannot survive by standing up to this army, so they will use any trick that they can think of to whittle us down. They are clever, but they will not win this battle of wits."

"And how are you going to fool the Sakovans?" asked the general.

"With the troops you are evacuating," smiled the premer. "They will believe that we fled from the fire. I have no doubt that they probably have spies behind us outside the forest. Those spies will report our retreat while we move forward and close the distance to our enemies. When the Sakovans are forced to face us, they will die."

"If we have six hours," frowned the general.

"If we have six hours," echoed the premer. "We must hope that we do. Anything less will be a disaster for us. We are several days into this forest. Without a six-hour head start, we would never reach the plains before it consumed us. That is why we also need this firebreak."

* * *

Xavo left the temple in Vandamar and hurried toward the secret clearing in the jungle near the beach. Lady Mystic was waiting for him.

"A short meeting?" she asked as Xavo entered the clearing.

"Vand may be going mad," nodded Xavo. "His mood swings were tremendous this morning. One moment he was smiling, and the next he was shouting."

"Did you discover where the ships left for last night?" asked Lady Mystic.

"I did," nodded Xavo. "It appears that the Sakovans managed to raid Duran and poison the food. Doralin lost thousands of men before they realized what was going on. Premer Tzargo has sent ten thousand men to safeguard the new supplies in Duran."

"Tzargo's own men?" inquired Lady Mystic. "That is most unusual. He only has five armies under his direct command. He must feel confident about our defenses if he is willing to part with a fifth of them."

"Aren't there other armies here for defense?" asked Xavo.

"There are city garrisons," nodded Lady Mystic, "but Vand likes to deal in overwhelming strength. I am surprised by Tzargo's move. He must truly expect the Sakovans to return to Duran."

"I suppose," frowned Xavo, "but there is more. Tzargo is leaving

for Fakara today, with the rest of his men."

"Fakara?" puzzled Lady Mystic. "Are things going poorly for Vand there?

Do they need reinforcements?"

"No," Xavo shook his head. "Cardijja's force landed in Meliban without opposition. It makes no sense to me, but Vand was extremely pleased about it. I have been ordered to report to the docks today. I am being sent to Fakara."

"No," Lady Mystic frowned skeptically. "Does Vand suspect you?"

"He has given no indication of suspicion," replied Xavo. "I tried to inquire why I was being sent, but the question was ignored."

"I do not like the sounds of this, Xavo," declared Lady Mystic. "I don't want you to go."

"I will not leave the island," promised Xavo. "I have unfinished business here. The ships will sail without me."

"Good," smiled Vand's daughter. "What else did you learn?"

"Vand's mages have discovered how to equalize an air tunnel," sighed Xavo. "I knew it was only a matter of time before they stumbled upon the answer. This information has already been disseminated to the battle mages on the mainland, so I must be careful with my report today. We do not know who controls Raven's Point right now."

"What will you do?" asked Lady Mystic.

"I will weave an air tunnel directly to the Imperial Palace in Khadoratung," replied Xavo. "I want you with me when I do it so that you can learn the location. If anything should happen to me, you must carry on what I have started."

"I will not listen to such talk," balked Lady Mystic. "I will learn what I must, but you will not talk about dying. Will the mages at the palace take a message from you? I though only Rhoda was allowed to do that?"

"If I am not on the ship today," shrugged Xavo, "Vand will already suspect me. I will no longer have anything to hide. When I contact Khadoratung, I will merely announce who I am and demand to speak to Emperor Marak."

"Clarvoy is in Khadora now," warned Lady Mystic. "You are taking great chances."

"The chances must be taken," replied Xavo. "As for Clarvoy, Vand has not heard from him. He is not happy about that."

"I wonder if he got caught up in the battle?" mused Lady Mystic. "That is what must have happened. There is no way that the Khadorans would ever catch Clarvoy. He has been spying on them for years. He has dozens of personas there."

“What I would give to know those personas,” sighed Xavo. “Without Clarvoy, Vand is blind and deaf.”

“Not any longer,” disagreed Lady Mystic. “The air tunnel now solves much of the problems of communications. Still, there is something to what you say. Vand has depended upon Clarvoy to present him the truth. Without him, Vand may get more information, but he will not know the value of it.”

* * *

The firebreak was long and narrow, and a hundred thousand men were trapped inside it. Soldiers, mages, and kruls squeezed tightly together to avoid the roaring flames and the blistering heat. The raging firestorm tore through the sevemore forest with amazing speed, trees exploding from the rapidly expanding sap. The strong winds spread the fire from tree to tree, but even the heat helped the fire to spread.

Premer Doralin watched one tree spontaneously combust, its needles shrinking from the heat, and the air rippling around it, until it just burst into flames. In seconds the tree was gone. Sparks flew into the firebreak, and people tried to duck as the fiery particles headed towards them, but everyone was packed too tightly to move. Shouts and curses filled the air as soldiers felt the burning particles sear their skin.

Suddenly, screams came from not far away from the premer. Doralin turned and saw a krul, his long hair burning rapidly. Soldiers tried to push away from the beast, but they could not, so they drew their swords and attacked it, trying to drive its body out of the crowd. Some of the soldiers’ uniforms caught on fire and pandemonium ripped through the tight crowd. Seconds later another krul burst into flames.

“Kill the kruls,” shouted a general. “Kill them before they burn us all.”

Doralin tried to cancel the order, but the soldiers had heard what they had wanted to hear. The orders soared through the long crowd of soldiers faster than the raging flames. Not only had the soldiers heard the orders, but so had the kruls. In the midst of the firestorm, the Motangan soldiers and the kruls attacked one another. The soldiers had difficulty drawing their swords and using them effectively in such a packed environment, but the kruls had no such limitations.

Premer Doralin watched in anger as scores of soldiers were thrown into the flames outside the firebreak. He shouted for the fighting to stop as he watched kruls burst into flames and surge deeper into the crowd.

“It is too late to stop it,” General Valatosa declared loudly alongside the premer. “You cannot negotiate with a crazed krul. Once

they heard the order to attack them, the fight was joined to the death."

"I could live with the loss of the kruls," scowled Doralin, "but if this is happening for the whole length of my army, I will lose thousands of men."

"You will lose much more than that," frowned General Valatosa. "The armies that we told to evacuate to the plains will never make it alive. The fire is spreading too quickly. We are now but a fraction of the force sent to conquer the Sakova."

"The Sakovans will pay dearly for this," vowed Premer Doralin. "If all that I have left is a hundred thousand men, I will still sweep this country free of all life. As soon as the fire is gone, we march out of here in pursuit of the Sakovans."

"The men will be tired," warned the general. "Do not push them too hard."

"We are all tired," snarled Doralin. "We are tired of dying to these Sakovan tricks. All I want is a chance at a fair fight. If we get that, the Sakovan race will be extinct."

"I understand your anger, Premer," General Valatosa said softly, "but do not let these Sakovans get under your skin."

The premer glared at the general, but he soon sighed and nodded.

"You are right, Valatosa," admitted Doralin. "I am letting them get the best of me. We will still march forward as soon as the fires die. The men can sleep when night comes again. I have no delusions that we will reach the Sakovans this day, but tomorrow brings a new chance."

Chapter 10

Not According to Plan

Lord Rybak stood in the predawn fog at Raven's Point. The sea was not visible in the dense, unnatural fog, but the Situ lord knew that an armada was just offshore. On his right stood Rhoda, and on his left was Polema. Lord Rybak looked questioningly at Rhoda.

"I can hear them lowering small boats and getting into them," reported Rhoda. "Their voices are soft and muted. I suspect the soldiers already know their assignments."

"Can you tell how far offshore the large ships are?" asked Lord Rybak.

"The closest is about three hundred paces away," answered Rhoda. "They appear to be spread out along the coast."

"Pass that range on to the catapults, Polema," instructed Lord Rybak. "They are to fire as soon as they can see their target. Let me know when all of the catapults are set for that range."

Polema nodded and began moving her air tunnel from catapult to catapult. Rhoda continued to move her air tunnel across the sea, listening to the enemy's preparations.

"Small boats have been told to push off," reported Rhoda. "They are coming in."

Lord Rybak called softly to two soldiers who were standing nearby. The soldiers nodded and started running in opposite directions to inform the archers that the battle was about to begin.

"The catapults are all ready," reported Polema. "Should I instruct the men to dump the oil?"

"Yes," nodded Lord Rybak. "Tell them to hurry. It sounds like the Motangans are holding the fog in place longer than they did at Duran. I do not want to be surprised. Rhoda, inform the mage corps to prepare."

The minutes dragged by slowly as Lord Rybak stared into the fog. He could sense the sky lightening with a new dawn, but the fog still obscured everything.

Suddenly, a great wind roared in from the sea, blowing the fog away. Lord Rybak stared out at hundreds of Motangan behemoths spread out as far as he could see. Hundreds of small boats were already loaded and rowing their way to shore through the oil-slicked water of the harbor.

Scores of Khadoran catapults fired simultaneously from the shore,

sending great balls of fire screaming through the air. Dozens of the leviathans took hits in the initial barrage, and most of those started burning. Flaming arrows soared towards the small boats rowing ashore. Although most of the arrows fell short of their targets, the oil in the harbor ignited. The soldiers in the small boats panicked as the flames spread towards them. The small boats turned around and headed for the open sea, but the flames followed faster than the men could row. Screams filled the air as Motangan soldiers started burning to death. Some of the men jumped overboard, hoping to stay underwater long enough to swim free of the fire, but it was a losing proposition.

The catapults from the Motangan ships fired, even as the Motangans raced around to put out the fires onboard their ships. Khadoran water mages cast spells to drive the burning oil further offshore, and soon the nearest behemoths were floating in a sea of fire.

“Their line of ships is longer than we anticipated,” frowned Rhoda as she listened to an air tunnel. “They are landing troops far to the north. We have no catapults that far along the coast.”

“Notify Lord Saycher,” instructed Lord Rybak. “The Morgar armies will have to deal with it. What about to our south?”

“Nothing down there,” replied Rhoda as she swung her air tunnel to the mansion of the Morgar estate to deliver Lord Rybak’s message.

The flames upon the surface of the sea winked out, and Lord Rybak stared in wonder as more behemoths sailed forward from the rear of the armada.

“Their mages have extinguished the flames,” declared Polema. “I am not sure how they could do that, but they obviously have knowledge that we do not.”

“Can our sun mages burn their ships?” asked Lord Rybak.

“Not that far out,” Polema shook her head. “If they come in closer we may have a chance at it, but utilizing the sun to burn such a large vessel would take time. I do not think it is practical. By the time we get the ships burning, they will have already been unloaded into small boats.”

Lightning bolts suddenly pierced the sky and slammed into the Khadoran catapults. Lord Rybak looked on in horror as half a dozen catapults near him exploded in a shower of wooden splinters. Every soldier for several paces around each catapult was instantly killed. Even as the sight was being seared into Lord Rybak’s mind, another round of lightning bolts struck at the catapults further along the beach.

“More small boats coming in,” pointed Rhoda. “We cannot depend upon the oil in the water this time.”

Lord Rybak watched in horror as he witnessed his well-prepared defenses disintegrate. He sighed heavily as the air mages waited impatiently for his orders.

"Give the orders to torch the fields," Lord Rybak snapped. "Have the cavalry mount and prepare to guard our retreat."

"We are retreating?" frowned Polema. "At least let the mages attempt to defeat them."

"We are preparing for our retreat," corrected Lord Rybak. "We will use everything we have to slow the Motangans down, but I have no illusions about defeating them here at Raven's Point. Pass my orders along and then notify the mages to attack at will. When it is time to retreat, we will not have the luxury of calm communications."

Polema nodded and utilized an air tunnel to pass Lord Rybak's orders to the units.

"It is not going as expected, is it?" asked Rhoda.

"No, it isn't," admitted Lord Rybak. "I had expected to hold off their landing until late in the day. Our soldiers are well trained in night fighting, and the men know this terrain well from our training. We could have inflicted some serious harm to their armies."

"Perhaps the mages can still stall them long enough to help," suggested Rhoda.

"Not likely," frowned Lord Rybak. "There are just too many of them. The mages will kill a few of them, but it will not slow them down. I want you to get a horse and get out of here immediately."

"I am needed to coordinate our efforts," objected Rhoda. "I am staying as long as you stay."

"You are needed to maintain contact with Aakuta," declared Lord Rybak. "Polema can handle things here. Go now and ride swiftly. Make your way to Khadoratung."

"You fear the worst is about to befall us," frowned Rhoda. "All is not lost."

"The Motangans landing to our north will soon cut off our path of retreat," sighed Lord Rybak. "If Lord Saycher has as many opponents as we do, his forces will not be able to contain the Motangans. The coastland of Khadora is falling into the enemy's hands. Mount up and ride out. That is an order."

Rhoda stared defiantly at Lord Rybak for a moment, but she could tell that he was unrelenting. Eventually she nodded and retreated to find a horse. Polema watched her fellow mage depart. She dropped the air tunnel, having notified everyone of Lord Rybak's orders.

"You think we are all going to die here today?" she asked the Situ lord.

"A good many men will die here today," Lord Rybak said softly, "but I will do my best to preserve those that I can. "You will lead the

mages in retreat when the time comes. Do not be fearful."

"I am not afraid to die," responded Polema. "It's funny in a way. When I was a slave, you would think that I would have embraced death to flee from bondage, but I was very afraid to die. Now that Emperor Marak has made me a free woman, I should fear death even more because I finally have something to lose, but I do not fear it. I truly believe in Khadora now, and I know that we will prevail against this evil. If the cost of that success is my own life, I will give it freely."

Lord Rybak smiled thinly at the mage and nodded his head. "Your feelings could have come from my own heart," he said softly. "While I was never a slave, my life was owned by the lords of Khadora just the same as yours was. Marak changed everything for me. I will not let these invaders take away what we have made in Khadora. We will defeat them, but not here, and not today."

Screams from the harbor demanded Lord Rybak's attention, and he gazed at the hundreds of small boats heading for the shore. Thousands of objects flew through the air as the Khadoran mages sent them soaring towards the invaders. Rocks, tools, and even long logs were magically propelled at the small boats. The boats slowed as the projectiles struck the invaders. That is when the Khadoran archers opened fire. Thousands of arrows streamed seaward, while lightning bolts continued to ravage the shore batteries.

"At least the Motangans are going to pay a price to land at Raven's Point," Lord Rybak said as he watched his last catapult blown to splinters. "Get me an update from Lord Saycher."

While Polema wove an air tunnel to the neighboring Morgar estate, Lord Rybak watched the Motangan mages change targets. With the Khadoran catapults destroyed, Vand's mages sought out the Khadoran mages. Lord Rybak winced as he saw a group of Khadoran mages disintegrated by a flash of lightning.

"Lord Saycher is being overrun," reported Polema. "He cannot hold them back. He requests permission to retreat."

Lord Rybak watched another group of mages destroyed. He nodded slowly.

"He may retreat," Lord Rybak said, "but he is to delay the Motangan advance as long as possible. I think the Motangan strategy is to cut off the defenders of Raven's Point. He must buy us a little time, but he may retreat when it is hopeless."

Polema passed the orders to Lord Saycher. Lord Rybak watched another group of mages destroyed, and he bared his teeth in rage.

"Get our mages out of here now," he snapped at Polema. "We cannot afford to lose them all. We will need them in the forests."

Lord Rybak turned from Polema and quickly surveyed the battlefield. When he saw Polema out of the corner of his eye, he

turned to stare at her.

"I gave you an order," frowned Lord Rybak. "Why are you still here?"

"Your order is being carried out," Polema retorted. "You cannot command your forces without my aid. I am staying to help communicate the retreat."

Lord Rybak opened his mouth to argue, but Polema's gaze was defiant. He sighed and nodded.

"Very well," Lord Rybak said. "I want all infantry other than the archers to retreat after the mages. Tell them to hurry. There is not much time left."

"Done," Polema reported moments later. "What happens next?"

"The archers will be next to retreat," explained the Situ lord. "That will happen after the rest of the infantry is gone, or the Motangans threaten to overrun our positions, whichever comes first. Advise them to be ready for a swift retreat. Also notify the cavalry of all orders. They are our last line of defense. Their time for battle is soon upon them."

* * *

StarWind and Goral stood upon a small rise in the Sakovan heartland. StarWind removed her sheath and handed it to the Sakovan giant. He took the sword and draped its sheath strap over his shoulder. He watched silently as the Sakovan spymaster pulled on a black cloak and adjusted it. She frowned and immediately pulled it off and tossed it to the ground. StarWind picked up the other black cloak and tried it on.

"It is a good thing we got two of their mages," she commented as she adjusted the cloak. The shoulders in that last one were much too large for me."

"You should rethink this idea of yours," Goral cautioned softly. "Just because it worked yesterday is no reason to push your luck to the edge. What knowledge can you possibly hope to gain?"

"That we will not know until I have procured the information," shrugged StarWind as she smiled tautly at her friend. "I understand your concerns, Goral, but this is what I do. I cannot ask anyone else to infiltrate the enemy camp."

"You sneak into Omungan cities and discover their secrets," frowned Goral. "This is not the same. There are hundreds of thousands of these Motangans. Wasn't yesterday's penetration enough to dissuade you?"

"I learned nothing yesterday," frowned StarWind, "except that the mages have no idea what is going on. I have to get closer to the army officers to learn anything interesting."

"And how will you do that?" Goral shook his head. "The mages

know nothing because the army does not trust them, yet you are going to sneak in there dressed as a mage. The whole idea is foolish."

"Do you have a better idea?" retorted StarWind, perhaps a little too harshly. "They have no women in their army. I cannot impersonate a soldier. This costume is my only chance to spy on them."

"I would suggest sending a man in your place," shrugged Goral, "but even that is foolish. I doubt the premer shares much information with anyone."

"Then it is the premer that I must spy on," shrugged StarWind. "Stop worrying about it. Take the extra cloak with you. I would not want them to discover it. Hopefully, I will be in and out of there in a few hours. Have my choka ready for me in case I need a swift exit."

"I will be here," promised Goral as he sighed with defeat. "May Kaltara watch over you."

StarWind smiled at Goral and left her position of concealment as she pulled the black hood over her head. She walked towards the huge encampment and saw the sentries look questioningly towards her as she approached. She felt her teeth grating and willed her body to relax. When she got close to the guards, she saw them stiffen and move to intercept her. She had anticipated the move.

"What are you doing outside the encampment?" asked one of the sentries.

"What are you doing questioning one of Vand's chosen?" StarWind shot back. "I follow my orders just as you do. My orders required a journey outside the perimeter. Do you wish to make an issue of it?"

"We were not informed of anyone outside the perimeter," retorted the guard.

"As if you have a need to know," spat StarWind. "Stand aside, or I shall inform Premer Doralin of the reason for my delay."

The sentries exchanged anxious glances at the implied threat. One of the sentries shrugged and returned to his post, but the other stood defiantly for several long moments. StarWind was about to speak again when the remaining sentry finally shook his head and walked away. The Sakovan spymaster smiled inwardly as she walked past the sentries and entered the encampment.

StarWind gazed about at the thousands of tents and campfires. She chose a wide path through the encampment that looked like it headed towards the center where she expected to find the premer's tent. So many people were moving around the camp that she was unaware of the black-cloaked person following her. She hadn't walked more than a hundred paces before she felt her body freeze. She tried to turn around to view her attacker, but her body would not respond.

While her head was the only part of her body that had movement, she could not turn it enough to see behind her. It mattered little. Within seconds, a black-cloaked man walked around her and flipped the hood off of her face.

"What have we here?" the mage smiled cruelly. "Do you think a black cloak makes you invisible in Vand's encampment? Who are you, and what is your mission?"

"Release me this instant," snarled StarWind. "How dare you attack me in this manner? Premer Doralin will learn of this outrageous behavior."

"How dare I?" smirked the mage. "My, my, how original. You may think we Motangans are stupid, but you will soon learn differently. No Motangan mage is allowed to enter or leave the encampment except through the mage entrance. Everyone knows that, except Sakovans."

The mage walked completely around StarWind in a leisurely manner, feeling completely in control of the situation. He stopped in front of her and lifted up her cloak to view what the Sakovan was wearing underneath.

"At least you were not foolish enough to smuggle a sword into the camp," smiled the mage. "Seeing as you claim to be so close to Premer Doralin, I suspect that is where I shall take you. Besides, only he can authorize me to do what I want to do to you. Before I am done with you, you will provide every secret the Sakovans hold dear to their hearts, and if you think you can escape the torture by killing yourself, think again. You will never be allowed to harm yourself or anyone else. You will answer every question without fail. That is Zatho's promise to you."

The mage summoned some soldiers nearby who had stopped their activities to witness the incident. Zatho instructed them to fetch a cart for the prisoner, and several soldiers dashed away to comply. The mage stood in front of StarWind and smiled as he stared into her eyes, as if they would reveal something to him. The minutes dragged on for StarWind as she wondered if she would get a chance to kill herself before she revealed too much.

"You won't die anytime soon," Zatho promised with a chuckle as if he had read her mind. "I am supposed to advise you to cooperate fully so things will go easier for you, but I actually prefer to find you stubborn and obstinate. There is nothing quite so satisfying as a reluctant talker."

StarWind remained silent and eventually two soldiers arrived with a caged cart. Zatho instructed the soldiers to grasp StarWind as he removed the freeze spell. StarWind's hands were immediately bound behind her back with rope, and she was lifted onto the cart.

The cage door swung shut and was barred from the outside. Zatho paused to gaze once more at the Sakovan spymaster before he climbed onto the seat of the cart and instructed the soldiers to take him to Premer Doralin.

StarWind instinctively gazed at her surroundings as she was carted deeper into the encampment. She took small comfort in the fact that her body had not been searched. Although she had left her sword with Goral, she still possessed numerous stars and knives secreted in various places. All she needed was a chance to get her hands on one of them, and she would deprive Zatho of his intended pleasure.

Eventually, a large tent came into view, and StarWind knew that they had reached their destination. The cart halted in front of the large tent, and Zatho climbed off the seat and marched to the rear of the cart. Several soldiers immediately converged at the rear of the cart and opened the door to the cage. They hauled StarWind out of the cage.

"I wish to present her to Premer Doralin," declared Zatho. "She is a Sakovan spy."

The soldiers ignored the mage as half a dozen hands began roving over StarWind's body. The Sakovan spymaster cringed as each knife and star was discovered and tossed to the ground.

"Does she know magic?" asked one of the soldiers.

"I do not know for sure," admitted Zatho, "but I highly doubt it."

"We take no chances with the premer," retorted the soldier as he placed a heavy black sack over StarWind's head. "You may enter the tent, Zatho. We will bring the prisoner in as soon as Premer Doralin requests her."

The mage nodded and marched into the premer's tent. Doralin was in a meeting with a large group of generals. He looked up with annoyance at the intrusion.

"Pardon the interruption, Premer," smiled Zatho, "but I thought you should be made aware immediately. I have captured a Sakovan spy."

The premer's annoyance instantly gave way to curiosity. "Bring him in immediately," ordered the premer.

"It is a she," corrected the mage as he signaled to the soldiers outside the flap.

Doralin nodded as he turned his attention back to the generals. "I think this meeting can be concluded now," he said with finality. "Think about what I have said and bring me your recommendations as soon as possible."

Most of the generals nodded and turned to leave the tent as StarWind was dragged in.

"What about our supplies?" asked one of the generals before

leaving. “Food is starting to run out. When will our next shipment be?”

“Soon,” Premer Doralin replied distractedly as he watched the Sakovan being brought in. “We have had to take extra precautions to eliminate the chance of any more poisonings. Duran is now staffed by over a thousand men to protect the food. Our first shipment should be arriving in just a few days.”

The general nodded and joined the others leaving the tent. StarWind was led to a chair and forced to sit down. She was swiftly tied to the chair to prevent her escape.

“Is she magical?” asked Premer Doralin as he walked away from the table and stood in front of the captive.

“We don’t know,” shrugged Zatho. “Your men put the sack on her head just in case.”

“She had quite an assortment of weapons on her body,” offered one of the soldiers. “Still, we do not like taking chances with your life.”

“Understandable,” nodded the premer, “but I want to gaze upon her. Remove the sack.”

The soldier moved hesitantly, but he obeyed the order. He removed the special sack from StarWind’s head, but he remained poised to immediately replace it. The premer stared at StarWind for several moments before speaking.

“You are quite an attractive woman,” stated the premer. “What is your name?”

StarWind toyed with the idea of refusing to talk, but she knew that the torture would gain the Motangans whatever knowledge they desired. She decided to be cooperative up to a point.

“My name is StarWind,” the Sakovan spymaster replied. “May I assume that you are Premer Doralin?”

“I am,” the premer smiled. “You certainly appear calm in your current situation. May I presume that spying is something that you have done for some time?”

“It is my vocation,” nodded StarWind. “Or should I say was?”

“You are eager to taste death?” asked the premer.

“No one is eager for death,” shrugged StarWind, “but I know when I have failed my mission. I know that you will never let me leave this camp alive.”

“True,” nodded the premer, “but I may allow you to live within the camp, providing you tell me what I want to know.”

“Premer Doralin,” cautioned Zatho, “do not trust this woman. She will try to take her own life to avoid giving us the information that we want. Let me extract the information from her. You know that I never fail to get what we want.”

“Your talents are well known, Zatho,” nodded the premer, “but I will give this woman a chance to avoid the needless pain of your interrogation. She is such a beautiful creature that I am hesitant to watch you disfigure her.”

“There is little that I can offer you no matter which method of interrogation you choose,” interjected StarWind. “I told you that I was a spy and have been so for many years. My task was to spy on the Omungans before they were defeated. As such, I spent my life in the Omungan cities plying my trade. There is much that I can tell you about those cities, but I fear that is not the type of information that you are seeking.”

“I am sure that there is much that you can reveal,” smiled Premer Doralin. “You know enough of the geography of the Sakova to find our encampment. My maps could use much updating in that regard. Are you willing to disclose what you know without torture?”

“I will reveal what I can,” nodded StarWind, “but there is little that I can offer in terms of Sakovan secrets. The Star does not confide in me.”

“She is faking her cooperation,” Zatho blurted out. “She will fill you with lies and misinformation. Only my methods will get to the truth. Do not be tricked by her pretty face.”

“I suspect that you are right, Zatho,” sighed the premer. “Still, I am tempted to give her a chance. The armies are not marching today, as they need their rest before another major battle. I will give the Sakovan only this day to tell me what I need to know. If I am not satisfied by morning with her level of cooperation, I shall turn her over to you.”

“You must keep the sack on her head,” warned Zatho. “She might have magical abilities.”

Premer Doralin sighed and nodded to the soldier beside StarWind. The soldier placed the sack over StarWind’s head, and the Sakovan spymaster knew that she would not be able to talk her way out of her predicament.

Chapter 11

Making a Stand

Lord Rybak stood on a rise west of Raven's Point, large columns of smoke rising high in the sky as the Khadoran fields burned to deny the enemy any food. Through the smoky haze he watched the Motangan boats still pouring fresh troops onto the shore. He slowly moved his gaze closer to the rise that he stood on and saw the Situ cavalry engaging the vanguard of the Motangan army. Mounted Situ soldiers charged the Motangan lines in an attempt to slow the advance, but the red-uniformed soldiers continued to push steadily westward.

"What is the situation in the north?" Lord Rybak asked.

"Lord Saycher has retreated," replied Polema. "His people are safely over the first trench, and he has destroyed the northern bridge spanning it."

"And the Motangans up there?" asked Lord Rybak.

"They are not pursuing Lord Saycher," advised the air mage. "He suspects that they have turned south to flank our troops."

"He suspects?" snapped Lord Rybak. "That is not acceptable. Contact him again and tell him to get scouts out. I must know where those Motangan troops are heading."

Lord Rybak returned his attention to the battle below while Polema contacted Lord Saycher. He saw his cavalry harassing the enemy, but the solid sea of red uniforms all the way to the coast ensured that he would have to retreat soon. Already the cavalry losses were easily visible.

"He already has scouts out," Polema interrupted his thoughts. "He just hasn't heard back from them."

Lord Rybak thought about ordering more scouts to be sent out, but he knew there was not time for that.

"What of our own evacuation?" he asked Polema. "Did you find out what is holding up the retreat?"

"It is the mages," Polema reported softly. "Many of them are not as physically fit as the soldiers are. They cannot move swiftly. They have the central bridge clogged, and the infantry is behind them. It will be hours before they are safely across the trench."

"We don't have hours," scowled Lord Rybak. "Our cavalry is being decimated. If we can hold another hour, that will be the best that we can do."

“Should I advise them to destroy the bridge in an hour?” asked Polema.

Lord Rybak stood silently for a long time, his eyes viewing the carnage below. Finally, he sighed heavily and shook his head.

“Order the southern bridge destroyed immediately,” instructed the Situ lord. “At the center bridge, our infantry soldiers are to bypass the mages. They are to jump into the trench. Have the men on the other side of the trench lower ropes for them to climb out. As soon as the last mage crosses the bridge, destroy it.”

“What if the Motangans arrive before that?” asked Polema as she wove an air tunnel to the central bridge.

“The bridge must be denied to the Motangans,” declared Lord Rybak. “Regardless of costs, that bridge must be destroyed before the Motangans reach it.”

“I understand,” Polema nodded solemnly.

Lord Rybak turned to the lectain behind him. The officer snapped to attention when he felt his lord’s eyes upon him.

“There will be a change in plans,” stated Lord Rybak. “We are going to try to draw the Motangans to the south. Order the troops to start edging towards the south with every charge.”

“That will take the pressure off their northern vanguard,” frowned the lectain. “They might get to the central bridge sooner than desired.”

“They might,” agreed Lord Rybak, “but that is a chance that we must take. I am gambling that the Motangans are out to destroy as many of us as possible. If the Motangans that landed to the north did not pursue Lord Saycher, it can only be because they want to flank us from the north. If I am correct, the whole Motangan army will turn south to chase us.”

“Then I pray that you are correct,” saluted the lectain. “Will you be retreating now?”

“No,’ Lord Rybak shook his head. “I will be riding with you, Lectain. We must delay our enemies for several more hours. If they fail to turn southward, I want to be in a position to change my orders.”

The lectain smiled and nodded. He bowed slightly to the Situ lord and retreated to his mount.

“You do not need to ride with them to issue orders,” frowned Polema. “I can do that from anywhere.”

“Can you also send messages from somewhere that you are not?” questioned Lord Rybak.

“What do you mean?” Polema asked.

“Our armies on the other side of the trench must be kept informed of what is happening here,” explained Lord Rybak. “If you

and I retreat, that task will remain uncompleted, and I will not retreat and leave you here. Besides, this battle is my responsibility. I plan to exact the maximum amount of damage on the enemy that we are capable of."

"Your presence will energize the men," smiled Polema. "They do look up to you."

"I am glad to finally hear that," smiled Lord Rybak. "I have spent the past few years trying to be like Emperor Marak. While I know that I can never compare myself to him, the love and respect from his men is his hallmark. They idolize him."

"You sound envious," stated Polema.

"I am," grinned Lord Rybak, "but not in a bad way. I owe my life to Marak. He took me in when any other man would have killed me for what I did to him."

"What did you do?" frowned Polema.

"I spied on him for the Situ clan," Lord Rybak said softly. "In fact, I did everything I could to ruin his career."

"And the Emperor never found out?" asked the air mage.

"He knew all along," chuckled Lord Rybak. "He was always one step ahead of me. I was such a fool then."

"I don't understand," replied Polema. "If he knew about your activities, why are you still alive?"

"Because Lord Marak saw something good in me," replied Lord Rybak. "He saw something that no one else saw. He let me play my games, all the while knowing that I would eventually come around to understanding what he was trying to do."

"I guess you did come to understand him," smiled Polema.

"More than most people know," Lord Rybak returned the smile. "After I became convinced that he was right and that I was wrong, I was taken prisoner by Lord Marshal Grefon of the Situ clan. The Situ almost tortured me to death, but Marak came and saved me."

"He actually sent an army to rescue you from the Situ army?" gasped Polema. "That could start a war."

"He sent no army," explained Lord Rybak. "He came personally with his two shadows. Lord Marak risked his own life to rescue a reformed traitor. Yes, I envy him, and yes, I try to emulate him. Who wouldn't after such a rescue? He not only saved my life, but he also gave me a new start in life."

"The orders have been given," announced the lectain as he rode onto the crest of the rise. "Our men will concentrate on the southern vanguard and start drawing them southward."

"Excellent," Lord Rybak responded as he turned to view the battlefield below. "It is time for us to move our observation post."

* * *

Goral rode Bertha into the Sakovan camp, leading StarWind's empty choka behind him. HawkShadow looked up from his seat at the campfire. Concern etched into his face, and he set his mug of coffee on the ground and rose. SkyDancer, who had been sitting next to the Sakovan assassin, also rose and followed. They caught up to Goral as the giant was tethering the two chokas.

"Where is StarWind?" asked HawkShadow.

"She was captured by the Motangans," Goral answered without inflection.

"Captured or killed?" asked HawkShadow as other Sakovans began crowding around.

"I saw her captured," reported Goral. "I can not say if she is still alive."

"You saw her captured?" echoed HawkShadow. "How could you see her captured and not fight to rescue her?"

"Easy, HawkShadow," cautioned StormSong. "Goral is not your enemy. He cannot take on the entire Motangan army by himself."

"There was nothing that I could do," Goral explained softly. "She was already well inside the perimeter of the encampment when she was captured. I would never have even reached her before she was hauled away. Do not make me feel worse than I already do. I asked her not to go, but she was adamant about it."

"Spying is what she chose to do," interjected SkyDancer. "No one knew the risks more than StarWind did."

"Stop talking about her in the past tense," snapped HawkShadow. "Goral did not see her killed."

"She is as good as dead," retorted Goral. "StarWind would never allow herself to be interrogated. She would kill herself first."

"Did you see where they took her?" asked HawkShadow.

"I could not," Goral shook his head. "The Motangan encampment is huge. They put her in a cage and hauled her away. I followed her progress as far as I could see, but their camp is endless. Eventually, she blended into the camp and I could not see her any more."

"Was she disguised?" asked HawkShadow.

"She wore one of these," nodded Goral as he held up a black cloak. "We killed two Motangan mages early in the morning. She used one of their cloaks to gain entrance into the encampment, but then something went wrong. I do not know what it was, but another mage suddenly came up behind her. There were already a thousand men between her and me."

HawkShadow's eyes fell on StarWind's sword as Goral removed the sheath from his shoulder and leaned it against a tree. He shook his head sadly and departed from the small group and returned to his seat by the campfire. He picked up his cup of coffee and withdrew into

himself. He did not even hear SkyDancer approach minutes later and sit down next to him.

"StarWind will be greatly missed," SkyDancer said. "Lyra relied tremendously on her advice."

"She is not dead yet," retorted the Sakovan assassin.

"HawkShadow," frowned SkyDancer, "face the reality of it. She cannot possibly escape from the Motangan encampment. Besides, Goral is correct. StarWind will kill herself before she reveals anything to the enemy. Too many good people are dying in this war."

"That is what wars are all about," spat HawkShadow. "I will not let these invaders come into our homeland and kill my brothers and sisters."

"None of us will allow that," SkyDancer nodded sympathetically. "Still, you must face the truth when it happens. I feel deeply for Goral. He was very close to StarWind, and he hasn't gotten over losing SilverEdge yet. You didn't make him feel any better by suggesting that he should have committed suicide to save her."

HawkShadow stared at his partner with confusion. "That is not how I meant it," he said softly. "I just didn't understand the situation until he described it."

"Well," shrugged SkyDancer, "that is how everyone took it. It sounded like you were chastising Goral for not rescuing StarWind."

"I will speak to Goral," declared HawkShadow as he rose suddenly.

"That would be nice," smiled SkyDancer. "Try to make him feel better. Her loss must be killing him."

HawkShadow nodded and walked over to the secluded spot where Goral had chosen to sit down. The giant looked up and saw the assassin approaching, but he quickly averted his eyes.

"I apologize," HawkShadow greeted Goral. "I should have known better than to ever question your devotion to StarWind."

"I understand your feelings well, brother," Goral smiled tautly. "If I thought that I could have traded my life for hers, I would not have hesitated, but there was no chance of success. She was already deep inside the camp."

HawkShadow stood silently, and Goral fidgeted uncomfortably while he waited for HawkShadow to leave.

"I mean no disrespect, HawkShadow," Goral finally said, "but I prefer to mourn in private this night. I hope you understand."

"I will leave you in peace," HawkShadow promised, "but I would request a favor before I go."

"What is it that you want?" asked Goral.

"The black cloak," HawkShadow replied.

Goral's eyes squinted suspiciously at HawkShadow, but he

nodded and pointed to the cloak.

"That is not the way to remember her, HawkShadow," Goral declared. "I know that you two were close, but the enemy's cloak is not a remembrance of StarWind. Take her sword instead."

HawkShadow smiled tautly and removed his own sheath and leaned it against the tree next to StarWind's. He picked up the black cloak and turned to leave.

"You can't be serious?" gasped Goral. "There is no way that you can survive the infiltration. This is not some small party of bandits that we are talking about. This is not even an Omungan army of ten thousand men. You cannot hope to sneak into the Motangan encampment and get out again. It is suicide."

"Suicide it may be," nodded HawkShadow, "but it is the only chance that StarWind has. Would you rather mourn her or me?"

"I certainly do not want to mourn both of you," countered Goral, "and that is exactly what I will end up doing if you carry through with this act of foolishness."

"And what foolishness is that?" asked SkyDancer as she walked towards the two men.

Neither Goral nor HawkShadow responded. SkyDancer's eyes fell on the black cloak in the assassin's hands. Deep creases marred her forehead as she saw HawkShadow's sword leaning against the tree.

"I will not allow it," SkyDancer said adamantly. "It is bad enough that our friends are dying daily, but I will not permit you to throw your life away."

"It is something that I must do," HawkShadow said softly. "I have done it many times before."

"In an encampment larger than StarCity?" balked SkyDancer. "You are crazy. I will admit that you are the best at what we do, but no one is that good."

"I could use your guidance, Goral," HawkShadow said, ignoring SkyDancer's argument. "If you will not lead me to where StarWind entered the encampment, could you at least draw me a map?"

"Tell him nothing," SkyDancer said angrily to Goral. "Do not help him to commit suicide."

"Then I will find my own way," HawkShadow said defiantly as he started to walk away.

"Why are you doing this?" asked SkyDancer. "Do you really think that you are invincible? Do you not believe that the Motangans are capable of striking you down?"

"No one is invincible," sighed HawkShadow, as he turned to stare at SkyDancer. "What would you do if it was me that had been captured today?"

"I would be mourning alongside Goral," replied SkyDancer as she

drew her sword. “Why can’t you do the same instead of trying to impress us all with your fantastic abilities, because we all know your true limitations. You are human like the rest of us, and you can be killed, and that is exactly what is going to happen tonight if you are allowed to leave this camp.”

HawkShadow glanced at the sword in SkyDancer’s hands and shook his head. “Is that really what you would do if I was captured?” he asked softly. “You would sit under a tree and cry about it? Be honest with yourself. What would you really do?”

A long awkward silence filled the air as the three Sakovans eyed one another. Finally, SkyDancer spoke.

“I would try to rescue you,” she admitted, “but that is different. I love you, HawkShadow. I would rather die than live knowing that I might have had a chance to save you, but didn’t try.”

“Then you know why I must go tonight,” HawkShadow said softly as he turned and walked away.

SkyDancer’s eyes widened with understanding, and tears started to roll down her cheeks. Her hands opened, and her sword fell to the ground as she stared at HawkShadow’s retreating back.

“I will stop him,” offered Goral as he rose. “He is not thinking clearly.”

“No,” sobbed SkyDancer. “Let him go. In fact, go with him. Guide him to where you last saw StarWind.”

“Are you sure?” asked the giant.

“As sure as I can be about anything,” nodded SkyDancer. “If he truly loves her, there is nothing that we can do to stop him. Give him every chance to succeed that you can without endangering your own life.”

Goral nodded solemnly and hurried after the Sakovan assassin.

* * *

The Situ lectain rode up the hill and halted alongside Lord Rybak. He sat quietly for a moment to catch his breath before speaking.

“It won’t work any more,” reported the lectain. “There are too few of us left for the Motangans to be bothered chasing. They are turning westward.”

“I see that,” frowned Lord Rybak as he gazed down at the battle raging below him. “Polema is talking to our troops at the central bridge now. If we have bought them enough time to get everyone across, we will continue to head south and retreat across the trench to safety.”

The lectain nodded silently as his eyes drifted to the battle. The Situ cavalry charged into the mass of red uniforms and swiftly retreated, hoping to draw the Motangans after them, but the enemy defended themselves and then continued their westward march.

“They need another hour,” Polema finally reported. “All of the infantry is safe across the trench, but the mages are still not completely across.”

“Another hour?” gasped the lectain. “That is not possible. The men can’t hold that long, Lord Rybak. It is impossible. We are like acorns floating in a sea of red. You can’t ask them to try to keep this up for another hour.”

Lord Rybak stood silently staring down at the battle as the cavalry ran another charge into the enemy’s flank. The southern Motangan flank halted slightly to repel the attack, but the rest of the enemy army continued onward as if unconcerned with the conflict. The minutes dragged on, as the crest of the hill remained shrouded in silence. Eventually, Lord Rybak tore his eyes from the destruction below and turned to face the lectain.

“Gather the men, Lectain,” ordered Lord Rybak. “Break off the attack and gather them all in the clearing to our west. I will meet you there in a few minutes.”

The lectain saluted and retreated down the hill. Polema looked curiously at the Situ lord.

“What are you going to do?” she asked.

“I am going to do what I must,” Lord Rybak replied vaguely. “Your services are no longer required east of the trench. I want you to ride to the central bridge as fast as you can. Get those mages across the trench in any manner possible.”

“You are not coming with me?” questioned Polema.

“I will travel with my troops,” replied Lord Rybak, “but you have important work to do. After you have gotten all of the mages to safety, I want you to report directly to Emperor Marak. Tell him of our experiences here. Explain the problem of timing when we have older women as mages. They simply cannot move fast enough for an effective withdrawal. This information will be critical when we need to evacuate the other zones.”

“I shall do as you request,” frowned Polema, “but you did not answer my question.”

“I did answer your question,” retorted Lord Rybak. “I will be riding with my men. Besides, my words were not a request. I gave you an order, and I expect you to carry it out. Get on your horse and ride swiftly.”

Polema’s brow creased heavily, but she mounted her horse and rode swiftly down the hill. Lord Rybak turned to gaze once more at the flood of red uniforms streaming westward. His lips pressed tightly together as he mounted his own horse and rode down the hill. By the time he reached the large clearing, hundreds of mounted Khadoran soldiers sat waiting for him.

Lord Rybak's eyes scanned the multitude of clan colors before him. A smile came briefly to his lips as he admired the way the clans had united to fight the enemy, but the smile did not last. He saw that the men were tired and many of them were wounded. He had asked much of the men under his command, and they had not faltered in the face of overwhelming odds.

"You men have done more for Khadora than anyone could have hoped for," Lord Rybak said loudly. "I want to thank you for your devotion and courage, but this battle is not over yet. The northern and southern bridges over the trench have been destroyed. Only the central bridge remains. It remains because we have mages stuck on this side of the trench. The battle that we have been fighting has been to buy time for those mages to get to safety. We need to buy them another hour before our task is done."

Groans rippled through the clearing, as the men understood what was being asked of them. They were not groans of protest, but rather groans of weariness. Lord Rybak felt sympathy for their feelings, but he saw no other option.

"Mages are a valuable weapon for Khadora in this war," Lord Rybak continued, "but they cannot be effective standing in the middle of the enemy. They would never survive such an encounter. Their art requires distance between them and the enemy troops. We must have them on the other side of the trench. While I can demand that each of you follow me into battle to buy that extra hour that the mages need, I will not do so. You men have shed enough blood for one day. I will, however, implore each of you to ride with me to gain the needed time. Those who do not wish to stay and fight may leave immediately and cross the trench."

"Are you truly going to lead the charge?" shouted one of the soldiers. "Or will you be safe upon the hill watching us die?"

"A fair question," Lord Rybak nodded. "While my duties as commander of this force are best performed in a position that gives me full view of the enemy's movements, there are far too few of us left to make observation worthwhile. I will not ask of you what I will not do myself. I will lead the charge."

The soldier nodded in satisfaction with the Situ lord's answer. The clearing remained silent and motionless for several minutes before Lord Rybak spoke again.

"I asked that those not willing to fight further leave us," Lord Rybak said loudly. "The time to leave is now. Think quickly and make your decision. We do not have much time."

"We are waiting for our orders," retorted one of the soldiers. "No Khadoran soldier will leave the field while his commander is still upon it. What will you have us do?"

Lord Rybak nodded in satisfaction at the response of his men. He smiled briefly and addressed the troops.

“There is a thick stand of forest between the Motangans and the bridge,” explained Lord Rybak. “I intend to ignite it into a blazing inferno.”

“The Motangans will go around it,” a soldier pointed out.

“Yes, they will,” nodded Lord Rybak, “and that is when we will attack them. We will divide into two groups, one north of the stand and one south of the stand. We will stand and fight for one hour and then turn and flee.”

“If any of us are still alive to retreat,” remarked a soldier.

“If any of us are still alive,” Lord Rybak echoed with a grim nod.

Chapter 12

Interrogation

The air shimmered with heat from the burning forest as the vanguard of the Motangan army came into view. The Motangan soldiers walked warily, expecting an ambush at any moment. Their fears were fully justified.

“Charge!” shouted Lord Rybak as he pointed his sword at the enemy army.

Hundreds of hooves pounded the ground as the Khadoran cavalry charged into the vanguard of the enemy army. Arrows flew by the horsemen as the Motangans reacted rapidly, but their targets were moving swiftly. Lord Rybak had seen the Motangan armies from many hills since the invasion began, and he knew their numbers were vast, but his perspective leading the charge was entirely different. As he charged into the enemy ranks, his eyes saw nothing but an endless sea of red before him.

Lord Rybak slashed left and right with his sword as he made contact with the Motangan soldiers. The first row of soldiers slashed back, and Lord Rybak felt stinging cuts to both of his legs, but he ignored the pain as he tried to ride deeper into the enemy army. His horse balked with nowhere to go. The Motangan ranks were so thick that many of the enemy soldiers could not raise their weapons to fight. The Motangan advance faltered as the northernmost columns turned southward to confront the ambush.

Lord Rybak’s horse backed slowly as the Motangan army pressed forward. The Situ lord could feel the horse’s unsteady footing as it stepped over bodies on the ground. Lord Rybak delivered another killing blow to the neck of a Motangan solder as he felt his horse going down. Fear briefly swept through his mind as he threw himself off the dying horse. Lord Rybak landed on top of a Motangan soldier, knocking the man off his feet, but there was no room for him to fall to the ground. Lord Rybak swung his sword into the necks of the Motangan soldiers around him even as he felt the sharp blades penetrating his body. His body suddenly felt limp and refused to respond to his commands. His sword fell from his hands, and his vision turned to darkness. The sounds of battle slowly faded to nothing, and Lord Rybak issued his last prayer to Kaltara.

* * *

“Are you sure of this?” Goral asked HawkShadow as the assassin

adjusted his black cloak.

"I have never been surer of anything," replied HawkShadow. "Stop asking me that."

"Sorry," Goral said sheepishly. "As much as I want StarWind back, I do not want to lose another friend. Perhaps I should go with you?"

"And what would we disguise you as?" asked HawkShadow. "A krul perhaps? Look, Goral, I understand your concern, and I appreciate it, but I am not throwing my life away. I am the best chance of escaping that StarWind has."

"I know that," nodded the giant, "but even you must admit that this mission is impossible."

"Improbable," corrected the assassin, "but not impossible. I will just have to be careful."

"You will not even get past the sentries," frowned Goral. "They almost stopped StarWind, and in a way, I wish they had. She would have been close enough for me to go to her aid then."

"Stop punishing yourself, Goral," HawkShadow replied soothingly. "You should have no guilt over this episode. StarWind is the best at what she does, but that does not make her infallible. She knew that as well as you and I do."

Goral remained silent as he gazed up at the dark night sky. HawkShadow finished his preparations and stared at the dimly lit encampment.

"I will not be walking into the encampment if that eases your mind a bit," HawkShadow offered softly.

"What do you mean?" asked Goral.

"I am going to sneak past the sentries," explained HawkShadow. "You could be of help if you promise not to endanger yourself."

"I will do anything I can to help you," offered Goral. "What do you want me to do?"

"I could use a diversion when I get close to the sentries," answered HawkShadow. "Nothing big and alarming. Just something to draw the curiosity of the sentries when I get close to them. I do not want the whole camp alerted."

"I understand," nodded Goral. "How will I know when to act?"

"Give me an hour," replied the assassin. "Make the diversion slightly to the east of the sentries. I only need them to look away for a few moments."

"I will provide what you need," assured the giant. "Good luck."

"Give me your prayers while you wait for me to return," smiled HawkShadow. "I have found them more effective than wishes for luck."

Goral smiled broadly as the black-cloaked assassin faded into the

darkness.

HawkShadow moved stealthily down the hill and dropped to his stomach when he reached the bottom. The assassin knew the terrain of the Sakova better than any other person, as his main task had been to patrol this land for the past few years. He crawled silently until he found the small gully that he needed to make his approach to the enemy encampment.

With painstakingly slow and deliberate movements, HawkShadow crawled along the gully towards the sentries. While his eyes could see nothing but the gully, HawkShadow's ears were attuned to the noises of the forest. He listened intently as he crawled.

Well within the hour he had requested, HawkShadow reached the area of the sentries. He listened carefully to the subtle sounds of the sentries and waited for Goral to make his diversion.

HawkShadow smiled when he heard the distant howl, the noise sounding like a wounded wolf. Immediately the closest sentries started moving restlessly. HawkShadow waited patiently. Moments later the howls came again, but this time they were considerably closer.

"What is that?" one of the sentries asked softly.

"Some wounded animal," shrugged the other sentry. "What are you worried about? Do you think the animal will attack us? It is probably afraid of humans. It will run as soon as it gets our scent."

Moments later the howl came again, much louder and obviously much closer.

"Its nose must be clogged then," one of the sentries declared sarcastically. "That thing is heading straight for us."

"Look!" the other sentry said excitedly. "Look at the size of it! It is almost as large as a krul."

"That is no wolf," the first sentry said softly. "It looks almost human. We should sound the alarm."

"And end up looking like fools," spat the other sentry. "Do not include me in your plans. Just keep your eyes on it."

HawkShadow smiled and started crawling past the sentries.

"I can't see anything but a dim outline," frowned the first sentry. "It does look human, though."

The voices of the sentries faded as HawkShadow continued crawling along the gully. When he reached an area where no human sounds reached his ears, the assassin rose and stuck his head up. He looked around quickly and saw that he was in the middle of a group of tents separated by the small gully. Smoke still rose from some of the campfires, but no one appeared to be awake.

HawkShadow climbed out of the gully and brushed the dirt from his cloak. He took a moment to get his bearings and then walked between the tents to the large pathway that Goral had pointed out

earlier. When he reached the path, he turned towards the center of the encampment and walked purposefully. Several soldiers moved along the pathway, but they paid no particular attention to the Motangan mage. HawkShadow thanked Kaltara for their lack of curiosity.

The encampment was huge, and HawkShadow walked for over an hour before he found the large tent that was his target. He did not even know if StarWind would be inside the tent, but it was where he had to start his search. On his first pass, the assassin walked past the tent, noting the four guards stationed in front and behind it. A smaller tent alongside the big tent also had two guards posted outside its front entrance. He wondered about the need for guards on the smaller tent, but he appeared uninterested as he walked by it.

HawkShadow made a second pass in front of the two tents, memorizing the faces of the guards that he could see. He knew that was all the passes he could get in a short span of time without arousing suspicion, so he strode off to check out some of the rest of the encampment.

One area of the encampment was awake and alert, their campfires burning brightly as soldiers sat around the flames talking softly. HawkShadow noted its location and continued onward. As he approached the perimeter of the encampment, he saw a makeshift fence of black fabric attached to posts in the ground. The makeshift fence even had a gate in it. His eyes narrowed with curiosity as he approached it.

HawkShadow bit his lip and moved swiftly behind a large tree when the gate opened and two black-cloaked men emerged. What he saw when the gate was opened caused a chill shiver to race up his spine. The area within the fence was loaded with black tents, and the few people he saw moving about inside the fence all were adorned with black cloaks.

HawkShadow stood immobile as the two magicians passed by. They were talking softly, and the assassin could not make out what they were saying. HawkShadow waited several moments after the two mages disappeared before stepping out from behind the tree. Looking at the night sky to determine the time, he decided it was time for another pass by the large tent.

HawkShadow's eyes constantly scanned his surroundings as he walked through the encampment. He noticed that fewer people were awake and moving around. The camp was asleep. He smiled inwardly as the big tent came into view. When he gazed at the sentries in front of the tent, he noticed they were different soldiers than before. Making a quick decision, HawkShadow turned and walked straight for the door flap. The sentries stiffened at his approach.

"The premer is asleep," announced one of the sentries. "You will

have to come back in the morning."

HawkShadow halted before the two soldiers and stared at the one who had spoken.

"I have not come to see the premer," HawkShadow declared. "I have come to interrogate the prisoner."

"You mages are not supposed to get her until morning," frowned one of the sentries.

"Morning?" echoed HawkShadow as he made a point of gazing up at the stars. "I was told that she would be available the next day. The next day has already begun."

The sentries stared questioningly at each other. One of them shrugged indifferently, but the other remained skeptical.

"When a prisoner has information that may speed the destruction of our enemies," pushed HawkShadow, "we do not wait for the sun to come up. I have been sent to gather her."

"It matters little to me," shrugged the skeptical sentry as his eyes glanced at the small tent not far away, "but she is not here. She has been taken to the generals' dining tent. The premer would never sleep well with a spy in the same tent."

"Understandable," nodded HawkShadow. "I hope she has been kept under guard?"

"There is always a man inside with her," nodded the sentry, "but I understand that she is securely bound in any event. She is not going anywhere."

HawkShadow nodded his appreciation and spun around. He marched directly to the two sentries standing before the small tent. They not only saw him coming, but they noticed where he was coming from. He smiled inwardly as he marched up to the sentries and halted before them.

"I have come to interrogate the prisoner," declared HawkShadow. "Do not bother telling me to wait until morning. The premer said she would be made available to us the next day, and technically, that day has begun."

"Are you taking her away, or just questioning her?" asked one of the sentries.

"What difference does it make to you what my orders are?" scowled HawkShadow. "It is none of your concern."

"I meant no disrespect," cowered the sentry. "Our orders are to guard her until morning. If you wish to merely interrogate her, then you may enter, but to take her out of this tent will require an order from our superiors, and I am not anxious to awaken them."

HawkShadow let his deep frown soften and nodded sympathetically. "I will try interrogating her in this tent," he promised. "If she needs to be moved, I will give you sufficient notice

to alert your superiors."

"Thank you," the sentry sighed with relief.

"You will move your positions several paces further away from the door flap, though," HawkShadow said sternly. "We do not allow people to listen to our interrogations."

"But there is…" began one of the sentries.

"I know," HawkShadow interrupted. "I will deal with that problem separately.

The two sentries nodded and moved a few paces away from the door flap. HawkShadow moved the flap to one side and entered the tent. A soldier inside the tent immediately rose from his chair and snapped to attention. HawkShadow ignored the soldier as his eyes scanned the dark interior of the tent.

"She is sleeping in the corner," pointed the soldier.

HawkShadow moved towards the corner of the tent that the soldier had indicated. He saw a form in the darkness on the ground.

"Shall I light a torch for you?" asked the soldier.

"No," replied HawkShadow, "but you cannot be allowed to hear the interrogation."

"I am not permitted to leave the tent for any reason," objected the soldier as HawkShadow stooped next to the sleeping person.

"Then you will be allowed to remain," HawkShadow declared. "Get me some bread and water."

The soldier nodded as HawkShadow reached out and touched the sleeping form. He felt the person move, but he could not be sure that it was StarWind. A black sack covered the person's head and a blanket covered the body. HawkShadow peeled the blanket back and saw the black cloak of a Motangan magician. His heart skipped a beat as he began to believe that it was actually StarWind.

"There is some meat available as well," offered the soldier as he held out a flask of water and a loaf of bread. "There is not much of it, but enough for you to ease the hunger. Would you like some?"

"I am not hungry," HawkShadow said as he rose to a standing position and turned to face the soldier. "The bread and water is for you. I want you to dampen the bread and stuff it in your ears. Keep adding more until you can no longer hear my voice."

HawkShadow watched closely as the soldier complied with the order. He kept talking softly, saying nothing in particular. Eventually the soldier nodded and indicated that he could not hear. HawkShadow turned and bent towards the sleeping body. He gently removed the black sack from the prisoner's head. He felt as if a jolt of lightning was racing up his spine as he saw StarWind's face staring at him with wide-open eyes. He smiled broadly and winked at her.

Dropping the sack on the floor, HawkShadow rose and spun

towards the soldier. The assassin's straight rigid fingers stabbed into the soldier's throat before the man could understand that he was in trouble. The soldier's eyes bulged from his head, and his mouth opened wide to scream, but nothing came out except a desperate wheezing. HawkShadow's hands streaked out and grabbed the wrists of the soldier. The soldier fought to free his hands, but only for a few moments. HawkShadow lowered the dead soldier to the ground and turned back to StarWind.

"Are you crazy?" she whispered. "Do you have a plan to get us out of here?"

"No to both," grinned HawkShadow. "Roll onto your stomach so I can cut the ropes binding you."

StarWind immediately complied and HawkShadow's knife sliced through the ropes holding StarWind's arms behind her back. She sat up and rubbed her wrists as HawkShadow pulled the blanket completely away.

"Mages are only allowed to enter or leave via the mage section," whispered StarWind. "That is what got me caught. I came in the wrong entrance."

"Then we shall leave through the mage section," smiled HawkShadow. "I already know where it is. Move out of the corner."

StarWind rose and moved away from her makeshift bed. HawkShadow lifted the dead soldier and placed him where StarWind had been. He pulled the black sack over the man's head and then covered the rest of his body with the blanket. He turned to find StarWind rummaging through a sack in the other corner. He smiled as he saw her slipping knives under her cloak and into her boots. He waited patiently until StarWind was reequipped and ready to leave.

"If I try to remove the prisoner," explained HawkShadow, "the sentries outside will not allow it without approval. So this is my plan. I am going to go out first. Wait a short while and then follow me. I will not be in sight when you exit the tent. Just turn to your left and walk calmly until you find me. Okay?"

"If you hear a fight," nodded StarWind, "get yourself out of here. There is no sense in giving them two prisoners."

"I am not leaving without you," declared HawkShadow. "If you start a fight, expect me to rush to your side. My advice is to avoid the fights. Let's just go home."

StarWind grinned and nodded. HawkShadow smiled and moved to the door flap. He opened it slightly and stepped outside. The two sentries immediately turned to see who was leaving the tent. HawkShadow marched angrily towards them.

"Why didn't you tell me that another mage was already interrogating the prisoner?" scowled HawkShadow. "Are you trying to

make me look like a fool?"

"I didn't know anything about it," one of the sentries said defensively.

"We just came on duty a short while ago," added the other. "We truly did not know. Will this cause trouble?"

HawkShadow maintained his glare for several seconds before sighing loudly and shaking his head.

"It could cause trouble," HawkShadow said conspiratorially, "but it doesn't have to. The other mage has already put the prisoner into a sleep spell, so I was not able to interrogate her. Listen. Avoid the other mage when she leaves. Try not to make eye contact with her or talk to her. If you can accomplish that, perhaps all of this will blow over and be forgotten. One word and her nasty temper will draw everyone's attention to you. I have to go."

"We will say nothing to her," promised one of the sentries as HawkShadow made a left and walked calmly along the path.

Moments later, StarWind nervously moved the door flap aside. Both sentries immediately turned away from the door and stared into the darkness. StarWind did not bother to be curious by their behavior. She immediately turned to the left and walked into the darkness. She walked for several minutes before a dark shape moved from behind a tree and started walking alongside her.

"What was all that about?" StarWind asked.

"I will tell you later," answered HawkShadow. "For now let's concentrate on getting out of here. I didn't want to mention it before, but exiting through the mage section makes me very nervous. They have constructed a fence of black cloth around their campsite. Everything inside that fence is black, even the tents. I fear they may have the ability to recognize their own people."

"And we will stand out," nodded StarWind. "There may be something to your feeling. I was captured by a mage, not the soldiers. Perhaps we are better off leaving the way you came in?"

"That is not workable," HawkShadow shook his head. "I needed a diversion from Goral to get in. We cannot get back out that way."

"Poor Goral," frowned StarWind. "He begged me not to come here, but I insisted. I bet he is blaming himself."

"Of course he is," shrugged HawkShadow. "Logically he knows that there was nothing he could do to save you, but he still feels responsible."

"I will make it up to him somehow," promised StarWind.

"It is too early to make such promises," warned the assassin. "Think about it after we get out of here."

"I will not be taken prisoner again," StarWind said with determination. "If we are discovered, expect me to fight to the death."

“I will be by your side,” HawkShadow declared. “We will take as many of the Motangans with us as we can.”

HawkShadow grabbed StarWind’s hand and dragged her off the path when the black fence came into view. They stood beside a large tree and stared at the gate.

“I know little of what is on the other side of the fence,” admitted HawkShadow, “but I doubt that we can change our minds once we pass through that gate.”

“What time is it?” asked StarWind

“A couple of hours before dawn,” answered HawkShadow.

“We have little choice then,” shrugged StarWind. “If we are still in this encampment when the dawn arrives, we will be dead.”

“Then let’s do it,” HawkShadow said more confidently than he truly felt.

The two Sakovans stepped back on the path and walked towards the gate. HawkShadow tried to open the gate, but it would not budge. He frowned and tried to pull harder, but it would not open.

“Magically locked?” StarWind suggested softly. “We cannot stand here like fools trying to open it.”

HawkShadow nodded and grabbed StarWind’s hand again. He led her back to the large tree, and they stood in the darkness.

“I am really making a mess of this rescue,” he frowned. “We will have to find another way out.”

“I still can’t believe that you came to get me,” replied StarWind. “You must have known that your odds were slim?”

“The odds were acceptable,” HawkShadow replied vaguely.

Unexpectedly, a black-cloaked mage appeared on the pathway. StarWind grabbed HawkShadow’s hand and led him onto the path behind the mage. As the mage approached the gate, he waved his hand and muttered some unintelligible words. The gate swung open. HawkShadow and StarWind quickened their pace and walked through the gate before it closed. The mage in front of them immediately lowered his hood and bared his head. HawkShadow gazed around the dark campsite. Very few people were moving about, but all of them had their heads bared.

“Everyone has their hood down,” whispered HawkShadow. “I do not like the looks of this.”

“Not to mention that the exit gate will also be magically sealed,” added StarWind. “I did not think of that until we were already through the gate. We may have just made a very big mistake.”

“Will anyone recognize you?” asked HawkShadow.

“Only one mage saw me,” answered StarWind. “We will stand out if we keep our hoods on. I am willing to risk it. Lower your hood.”

The two Sakovans lowered their hoods as they walked through

the black campsite. None of the other mages walking around appeared to take notice of the two Sakovans. HawkShadow tried to steer a path away from the magical lights that dotted the campsite, but it was impossible. Most of the lights were along the pathways, and walking between tents would arouse suspicion.

"Do you suppose the black fence is to stop the light from being seen outside the campsite?" asked HawkShadow.

"It is possible," shrugged StarWind, "but I think there is another reason as well. The mages are considered the elite of Motanga. They look down on the soldiers as beings that are barely human, and the soldiers resent it greatly."

"I sensed as much on the Island of Darkness," nodded HawkShadow, "but I did not think it was so widespread."

"There is the exit gate," StarWind said with joy evident in her voice.

"And how will we get through it?" asked HawkShadow as he slowed his pace. "There is not even a safe place to hide and wait for someone to open it."

HawkShadow's eyes roved around the enclosure and came to rest on the black fabric of the fence.

"I need to check the fence," HawkShadow whispered. "If it is only cloth, we can cut it and run."

"It may be magical as well," warned StarWind. "Be careful."

HawkShadow nodded and moved to a section of the fence away from the exit gate. He cautiously stretched out his hand and touched the fabric of the fence. A searing jolt raced up his arm and his body was thrown backwards. Immediately the air filled with the sounds of blaring horns. Shouts rang out from every direction as the mages of Motanga scurried to defend their campsite.

Chapter 13

Death of a Hero

The mage section of the Motangan encampment was akin to a beehive that had just been poked with a long stick. Shouts rang out in every direction as mages poured out of their tents. HawkShadow's body seared with pain from touching the fabric fence, but he gritted his teeth and rolled to the side of the nearest tent to get out of the glare of the nearest mage light.

StarWind stood frozen, staring at HawkShadow until she realized that others were responding to the alarm. She tore her eyes away from her fellow Sakovan and began looking around at the other mages. Black-cloaked mages were running in every direction as they sought out the cause for the alarm.

HawkShadow closed his eyes and tried to calm his body. Within moments his limbs ceased shaking, and he sighed with a small measure of relief. He forced himself to sit up and felt light-headed. Opening his eyes slowly, he saw dark shadows racing through the night. He shook his head and stood up. He looked over the tent in search of StarWind, but he could not see her. A mage ran behind the tent and stared questioningly at HawkShadow.

"Nothing here," HawkShadow said groggily. "Do you know what area the alarm came from?"

"No," replied the mage as he turned and ran.

HawkShadow turned and went in the opposite direction from the mage. He joined the growing crowd searching for the intruders, while his eyes scanned the crowd for the Sakovan spymaster.

"We may not get out of this," StarWind whispered as she came up behind HawkShadow.

"Stealth certainly isn't an option," nodded HawkShadow as he watched hundreds of black-cloaked mages milling around.

"Quiet!" a bald-headed mage shouted to the compound as the alarm horns ceased blaring. "Everyone shut up and listen."

It took several minutes for the mage campsite to quiet down, but it eventually fell silent.

"I want everyone to go and stand in front of your own tent," ordered the bald-headed mage. "Make sure that everyone standing with you belongs in your tent. If there is someone that you do not recognize, shout for assistance."

The mages started quietly moving towards their tents.

HawkShadow and StarWind were the only ones standing still. StarWind quickly grabbed HawkShadow's hand and led him along the fence as if they were heading for a tent.

"We are dead," StarWind proclaimed. "There is not tent for us to stand in front of."

"And soon we will be the only people not in front of a tent," nodded HawkShadow. "What do you want to do?"

* * *

The blaring horns caught SkyDancer's attention. She immediately turned her choka and raced through the forest towards the noise. As she reached the top of a small rise, she saw the mages' well-lit campsite. She slowed her choka and rode along the crest of the rise as her eyes scanned the fenced-in area. A black cloth fence ran for hundreds of paces to each side of a gate, and the area beyond the fence was dotted with black tents. Hundreds of black-cloaked mages milled about, apparently in search of intruders.

SkyDancer's eyes were drawn to one of the mages who was not moving. She stared in disbelief as she recognized StarWind. Her eyes continued moving as SkyDancer searched for HawkShadow, but she could not find him. When she looked back for StarWind, the spymaster was gone. SkyDancer immediately wove an air tunnel and directed it to where she knew Goral was waiting.

"StarWind is alive," SkyDancer said softly. "I just saw her. She is in the mage compound and not under guard. I think she is trying to escape, but the whole compound is awake and alert."

"Don't do anything foolish," warned Goral. "I am on my way."

"I will wait for you," promised SkyDancer, "but I cannot see HawkShadow. I suspect it was he who triggered the alarm by trying to get out. I think they have gotten themselves into a losing position this time."

Goral did not answer as he was already mounting Bertha and racing towards SkyDancer's position. SkyDancer dropped the air tunnel and gazed down at the encampment. She noted that the two sentries outside the gate were looking into the compound and not away from it. Their attention was drawn by the alarm and the ruckus inside the fence.

Suddenly she heard one of the mages shout loudly. The man's voice carried through the night air, and SkyDancer heard his instructions to the mages. She watched as the mages moved towards their tents. That was when she noticed StarWind and HawkShadow standing together. For a brief moment, they were the only two black-cloaked figures standing still. Even though the two Sakovans eventually started walking, SkyDancer knew that in mere moments they would be discovered as imposters.

Without a second thought for the consequences, SkyDancer grabbed two stars from her pouch and urged her choka into a gallop. She raced down the hill and headed for the gate in the black fence. The soldiers never heard the approach of the racing warbird. SkyDancer threw her Sakovan stars, one at a time, each of them striking one of the soldiers in the head. As she passed the falling soldiers, SkyDancer directed the choka away from the gate and towards the fence where she had last seen HawkShadow and StarWind.

SkyDancer aimed the choka squarely at the fence, knowing that the choka would raise its sharp claws to shred whatever was in front of it. As the impact became imminent, SkyDancer drew her sword. The choka's claws ripped into the black fabric of the fence, shredding the material easily. The sudden jolt of energy that was magically woven into the fabric surged through the choka's body, but it did not repel the beast. The choka's speed carried the bird and SkyDancer into the mage compound.

The choka was tossed into the air as the magical energy seared the bird's nerves. SkyDancer felt the warbird slipping from beneath her as she started falling to the ground. The Sakovan hit the ground hard, her sword flying from her hands. She immediately reached for more Sakovan stars as she looked around for targets. That was when the first fireball slammed into her body. She was vaguely aware of the wounded choka, not far from her, lashing out with its sharp claws. She heard the screams of the mages who had been unfortunate enough to be in its vicinity.

SkyDancer hurled stars at the closest magicians and then another fireball slammed into her. Her body screamed in pain as her flesh burned painfully. Her last thoughts were to aid the escape of her fellow Sakovans. Acting as if she were holding an air tunnel, SkyDancer spoke loudly.

"Diversion complete," she croaked. "Attack from the north."

SkyDancer's world grew dark as two more fireballs slammed into her already failing body.

* * *

StarWind and HawkShadow had just reached the end of the fence and had turned towards the center of the compound. They heard the shouts and spun around. HawkShadow's jaw dropped as he saw the choka thrown into the air. He recognized SkyDancer as she fell to the ground. The assassin dropped StarWind's hand and raced towards the conflict, his hands scrambling for Sakovan stars. StarWind was right behind him, also reaching for her weapons.

The two Sakovans were half way to SkyDancer when the first fireball slammed into her. Other fireballs soared into her as they ran

and before they could get close enough to come to her assistance, SkyDancer's body was in flames. They heard her dying words and saw the baldheaded mage take charge of the situation once again. They slowed to a walk.

"You," the head mage bellowed as he pointed at another mage, "run and inform the premer of a possible northern attack."

The baldheaded man stood and surveyed those around him. Several mages had been attacked by the warbird and were screaming loudly as they writhed in pain. Two more had been hit by Sakovan stars. One of them needed no medical assistance as he was dead, but the other was losing blood rapidly.

"I need some mages versed in the healing arts," shouted the head mage, "and I need them quickly. I also want several dozen mages near the northern perimeter. You organize the party," he added as he pointed at another mage.

The mages scurried to follow orders while the head mage watched everyone. HawkShadow glanced at the gaping hole in the fence and nudged StarWind. The spymaster nodded as her eyes scanned the area to see who might notice them escaping, but HawkShadow grabbed her hand and squeezed. He then let go of her hand and marched up to the head mage.

"Why didn't the sentries outside warn us of this attack," scowled HawkShadow. "They are either traitors or dead. I am going to find out which."

The baldheaded man turned and stared with narrow eyes at HawkShadow. Slowly he nodded his approval.

"Do not stray from the immediate area of the fence," commanded the head mage. "There may be more of them out there. And take someone with you."

HawkShadow nodded and turned to StarWind. "You," he said with authority as he pulled his hood up to cover his head, "come with me."

StarWind nodded dutifully and followed HawkShadow through the gap in the fence as she covered her own head. They turned towards the gate where the sentries were supposed to be. As soon as they saw the bodies of the sentries, they turned and ran up the hill towards the safety of the dark Sakova. Within moments they were on top of the rise looking down at the encampment. HawkShadow immediately fell to his knees and bowed his head in prayer.

"She was a brave woman," StarWind said softly when HawkShadow was done praying. "I know that you will miss her greatly. My heart cries for you. I know the feeling of losing a loved one."

"Yes," HawkShadow nodded sadly, "but you were not the cause of

LoneBadger's death."

"And you were not the cause of SkyDancer's death," retorted StarWind with confusion. "Do not blame yourself this way."

"I am the cause of her death," asserted HawkShadow. "I killed her."

"Nonsense," balked StarWind. "She was a trained infiltrator. She saw a chance to rescue us and took it. She could not have known what effect the fence would have on her choka. We should be glad that she happened to be in the vicinity. Her love for you may have driven her harder than normal, but that is not the same as saying that you killed her."

"You do not understand," explained HawkShadow. "I took away her reason for living. She came here tonight to rescue me, knowing that she would die."

"You are right," StarWind said with a puzzled look, "I do not understand. What do you mean that you took away her reason for living? You both loved each other. I can easily understand her sacrifice under those circumstances, but your words confuse me."

"I did not love SkyDancer," declared HawkShadow. "She loved me. Last night she found out that truth. I should never have let her discover that. For a long time I have kept that truth well hidden. I knew that she could not handle my real feelings."

"You love another?" frowned StarWind.

"I love you," HawkShadow smiled thinly. "I have always loved you, but I have kept it hidden. I know what LoneBadger's death did to you. I could not make you go through that again. As long as I roamed the Sakovan frontier, my life was forfeit on little notice."

"And when SkyDancer expressed her love for you," StarWind said with teary eyes, "you had one more reason to keep it hidden? Why did you reveal it?"

"I had to," admitted HawkShadow. "She could not understand why I had to free you from the Motangans. She thought I was going to throw my life away in the attempt to help you escape. Don't you see? She did exactly what she thought I was trying to do. I killed her."

"You did not kill her," Goral stated as he led Bertha and another choka into the clearing. "She might have acted that way early last night, but we talked about it the whole night. In the end, SkyDancer wished you and StarWind great happiness together. If she had not come around to rational thinking, I would not have let her out of my sight."

"Perhaps she fooled you," scowled HawkShadow.

"Hardly," smiled Goral. "She sent an air tunnel to me when she spotted StarWind in the mage camp. She was going to wait for me before taking action. I can only assume that something made her act

before I got here."

"She probably heard the orders for the mages to stand in front of their tents," interjected StarWind. "That would have driven me to action. Besides, HawkShadow, SkyDancer had no idea that the cloth fence was magically enhanced. I am sure that she merely expected to tear a gaping hole in the fence and then retreat. The choka was fast enough to whisk her away to safety if surprise was on her side, and it was. It took a while for the mages to react and they were already alert. I think her plan was clearly justified. It was not a suicide rush."

"Is that what got her?" asked Goral. "What does the fence do?"

"It produces a searing jolt if you touch it," answered HawkShadow. "One little touch threw me to the ground. It threw SkyDancer and the choka into the air. She never had a chance."

"I think the truth is there for you to see, HawkShadow," stated Goral. "Please do not remember SkyDancer as an irrational woman on a suicide mission. While she loved you dearly, she did eventually accept your love of another with the grace of a true Sakovan. Remember her as a fine warrior who gave her life for her brothers and sisters."

Goral handed the reins of one of the chokas to StarWind and then mounted Bertha. Without a further word, he turned and rode out of the clearing.

"His words are wise," smiled StarWind. "It is how I wish to remember SkyDancer. She was indeed a Sakovan hero."

"I will remember her as a hero as well," frowned HawkShadow, "but I seem to have messed everything up."

"How?" asked StarWind.

"First I burdened SkyDancer with my feelings," answered HawkShadow, "and now I have done the same to you. I hope we can still be friends after this."

StarWind grinned and wrapped her arms around HawkShadow. She kissed him affectionately and nibbled on his ear.

"I have loved you for some time, HawkShadow," cooed the spymaster. "I was afraid to get involved with you because of SkyDancer. I also did not understand your true feelings for me. Now I do. Let's forget about the worry of causing each other grief. Neither one of us may live through this war, but I am not willing to put my life on hold because of it."

"And if I die tomorrow?' frowned HawkShadow. "You will not feel deserted?"

"Of course I will," admitted StarWind, "but I will treasure our time together and not regret it. My memories of LoneBadger are not of his death. They are memories of wonderful days and wonderful feelings. I want to feel those wonderful feelings again, and I want to

share them with you."

"You will marry me then?" HawkShadow asked hopefully.

"As soon as you ask me properly," grinned StarWind.

* * *

Premer Tzargo walked down the gangplank and halted in front of Premer Cardijja in the city of Meliban.

"Greetings," said Premer Cardijja. "Have you brought the Emperor to Fakara?"

"I have," replied Premer Cardijja. "What are the results of your investigation?"

"The Jiadin have fled westward," reported Cardijja. "It appears that they ran over the mountains to Khadora. Perhaps they had word of our coming?"

"I don't think so," Tzargo shook his head. "Clarvoy indicated that they were looking to make peace with the free tribes. He spoke of them going to Angragar. What about the path between here and Vandegar? Is it secure?"

"It is uninhabited," replied Cardijja. "Even the small villages are empty. The fields have been burned and the animals have been taken. You will have no food available for your journey."

"That is what we have Duran for," smiled Tzargo.

"I heard that it was attacked?" frowned Cardijja.

"It was a tactical error on our part," shrugged Tzargo. "We only had a single corte protecting it. That will not happen again. We have thousands of troops there now, and they have built strong defenses. They could hold off the mightiest armada now. The enemy will never again threaten our supplies."

"Excellent," smiled Cardijja. "My men will create a safe corridor between here and Vandegar for the Emperor's passing."

"Not just for his passing," Tzargo retorted. "The corridor will remain in place at all times. My armies must have access to the supplies, and I will not have the supply caravans attacked."

"That is a massive area to protect," frowned Cardijja. "It will require a great many men and dilute the forces available to me to attack the Fakarans. I would prefer to send thousands of men with each caravan for protection. It would require much less troops."

Premer Tzargo hesitated before answering. "For now," he said, "form the corridor. After the Emperor is safely in Vandegar, and I have had a chance to see the countryside for myself, then we will discuss the future requirements for security."

"Fair enough," nodded Cardijja. "I will send out the vanguard now."

"First you must clear the main street of this city," instructed Tzargo. "I do not want any of your men in the Emperor's way when he

disembarks. I also want the city center clear of your troops. I will allow you to select the finest building in the city for the Emperor to rest in until morning."

Cardijja nodded as he thought about moving his officers out of the buildings they had been staying in. He turned and marched briskly towards the city center, shouting out orders as he went. Soldiers hurried to vacate their quarters from along the main street of the city. When he reached the administration building, Premer Cardijja ordered his staff to move his headquarters elsewhere. He also issued orders to his generals to start the process of creating a safe corridor to Vandegar far to the north. There were grumbles from the generals, but Cardijja's icy glare immediately halted any thought of dissension.

Satisfied that his orders would be obeyed, Premer Cardijja left the administration building and returned to the docks. Premer Tzargo nodded appreciatively as he gazed up the empty boulevard.

"Your men are efficient," greeted Tzargo. "The Emperor will be pleased."

"It is my goal to please the Emperor," smiled Cardijja.

"Then you will have seven wasooki delivered to him after he is settled in," replied Tzargo. "There is hunger after such a long sea voyage."

"Seven?" questioned Cardijja. "You have many men, Premer Tzargo. Surely you must mean more than that?"

"The seven wasooki are for the Emperor and his party," explained Tzargo. "My men will help themselves to your supplies."

"His party?" asked Cardijja. "Perhaps the administration building will not be large enough for all of them. There is an inn directly across the street. May I suggest that some of the Emperor's party utilize that building as well as the administration building?"

"His party is not numerous," Tzargo smiled knowingly, "but they have large appetites. I will allow you to stay with me and guide them to the administration building. You will learn realities that are only whispered of in Eldamar."

Premer Cardijja's brow creased in puzzlement, but he nodded his appreciation of the honor being bestowed upon him. The only time any of the premers, other than Tzargo, were allowed in the Emperor's presence was in the throne room in Vandamar. This day in Meliban would be a story to tell his children about.

The wait was not long. Moments after Premer Tzargo spoke, Motangan soldiers marched across the gangplank. Tzargo silently issued orders with his hands, and the soldiers formed corridors along the main street of the city. When the human corridor was complete, the Emperor's procession began. First came half a dozen black-cloaked mages, their eyes shifting constantly as if they did not trust their own

soldiers. Premer Cardijja frowned at their attitude, but he kept his mouth shut.

Next came a sight that caused Cardijja to gasp out loud. He had heard rumors of the Emperor's demons, but he did not believe the tales. He had never seen any evidence of the creatures during his many visits to the temple, but now he believed the rumors. The six creatures were extremely tall and appeared to have been chiseled out of shiny black rock. They had long sharp claws on their hands and feet, and the noise they made descending the gangplank sent a shiver up Cardijja's spine. Their heads were hideous distortions of a beastly nature, with long sharp horns protruding from their temples. Their snouts were long, and Cardijja swallowed hard when one of them opened its mouth. Several rows of sharp, meat-tearing teeth appeared quite capable of biting through the thickest of human bones.

"You see," smiled Premer Tzargo, "the rumors are not entirely false. You will also understand where six of the wasooki will be going tonight."

Premer Cardijja tore his eyes away from the demons and looked at Tzargo. He found the head premer smiling broadly at him. Cardijja realized that he was being used as a source of amusement for Tzargo, and he quickly turned away to watch the procession.

In the center of the six huge demons, Emperor Vand walked silently. His head swiveled slightly as he took in the sights of the city, but his expression was one of disinterest. Premer Cardijja noticed that six more black-cloaked mages followed the demons. There were no soldiers in the Emperor's inner circle.

"Are there no military advisors within the Emperor's party?" Cardijja asked as he turned to Premer Tzargo.

"I am in the Emperor's party," replied Tzargo. "I am the only military advisor he needs. Come. We are to lead the parade."

Premer Cardijja dutifully followed Tzargo and led the procession along the main street of Meliban. He halted outside the administration building, wondering how the demons would fit through the doorway. His silent question was immediately answered when one of the demons simply marched through the doorway, sending showers of wood splinters raining onto the porch as the wooden frame gave way to the black-rock creature. Cardijja stared at the now-enlarged doorway and shook his head. He bowed deeply as the Emperor passed by, but Vand did not appear to even notice him.

"I must make sure that the wasooki are prepared for the Emperor's party," Cardijja said to Tzargo as he hastened to get away from the administration building. "If anything is required by the Emperor, I will have men stationed in the park up the street. You only need to ask, and it will be supplied."

Premer Tzargo grinned as he watched Cardijja flee. He remembered his own feelings the first time he met the demons, but he was not about to feel sympathy for his rival. Cardijja was well respected by his men, and even Tzargo had to admit that the man was capable of great deeds, but he was not about to allow anyone to come between the Emperor and himself. A true Motangan never allowed that.

Chapter 14

Feline Persuasion

StormSong, ValleyBreeze, HawkShadow, StarWind, and Lyra dismounted from their chokas and turned to look at the narrow canyon they had just come through. General Didyk and General Manitow slid off their horses and joined the small group.

“Are you sure that halting and making a stand is a wise idea?” asked Lyra. “There are still far too many of the Motangans left.”

“This is the only passage in this ridge for a league in either direction,” nodded HawkShadow. “The plan is not without risks, but this is a golden opportunity to trim their numbers.”

“This is the ridge that I drew on Doralin’s map when I was captured,” interjected StarWind. “He thinks it runs on for leagues and leagues. He will be forced to bring his armies through it.”

“He would be a fool to believe you,” scowled StormSong. “Besides, he will obviously know that you are no longer captive. Won’t he change his plans?”

“He might,” shrugged HawkShadow, “but that does not change my thinking. Let’s assume that he is smart enough to send men out in each direction. Marching a league will take a good deal of time for those troops. Meanwhile, we can position archers atop the ridge where it ends.”

“So if he does question my information,” StarWind nodded, “his men will die three times as fast. We fight those coming through the canyon while our archers attack both ends of the ridge.”

“I think it can work,” added ValleyBreeze. “We could also have mages up with the archers. Our only problem will be breaking off the fight and retreating when they start to overrun us.”

“That is a problem,” frowned HawkShadow. “There is no easy way off the ridge.

“We can station troops on this side at each end of the ridge,” offered General Manitow. “We should be able to halt the Motangan advance long enough to give some time to those upon the ridge.”

“And how will your men retreat?” asked Lyra.

“Our men will be mounted,” answered General Didyk. “We can surely outrun the Motangans. Personally, I like this plan. I am glad that I am no longer fighting the Sakovans. The Motangans will lose a great many men in this battle. It will be a glorious victory for us.”

“You seem united in this,” smiled Lyra. “So be it then. We will

stand here and inflict as much damage as we can on the Motangans, but I want an organized withdrawal when the time comes. This will not be our last stand."

"Agreed," nodded HawkShadow. "We must preserve our people if we are to win this war."

"Have you contacted Marak about what I learned during my capture?" StarWind asked Lyra.

"Not yet," the Star of Sakova shook her head. "I will do that right after this meeting."

"And you will do that from StarCity?" StormSong asked sternly.

"I am not a feeble old woman," frowned Lyra. "I have much to offer in these battles."

"No one is questioning your power or your courage," interjected HawkShadow, "but you are more than just a military weapon. You are the heart and soul of our people. Your loss, even if a simple wounding, would demoralize our people. We cannot risk that at this time."

"He is right, Lyra," StarWind smiled compassionately. "You are the symbol of Kaltara to us. The time will come when your powers are truly needed, but it will not be a minor battle in the woods of the Sakova."

"Minor battle?" balked Lyra. "You cannot possibly believe that? Our whole army is on the line in this battle."

"Our whole army is on the line each and every day," declared General Manitow. "I agree that the Star should remove herself from the battlefield. I am going to ready my troops."

"Manitow has already spoken my words," smiled General Didyk as he bowed to the Star and retreated after General Manitow.

StormSong and ValleyBreeze smiled and also left. Lyra glared at HawkShadow and StarWind.

"The two of you planned this," accused Lyra, "didn't you?"

"If you mean making the others leave so that we could be alone with you," grinned HawkShadow, "then the answer is yes. StarWind and I would like you to marry us before you return to StarCity."

"Before I return…" Lyra began with a scowl, but she suddenly stopped short with a look of disbelief on her face. "Did you say marry you?"

"He did," grinned StarWind. "We want your blessing."

Tears came to Lyra's eyes, but she smiled broadly. She rushed over and hugged StarWind.

"I am so happy for both of you," Lyra cried. "We can have a big celebration when we all return to StarCity. I will have a beautiful gown made up for you."

"We do not want to wait until after the war," StarWind said softly. "We do not even want to wait until after this battle. We want

you to marry us now."

"Before the battle?" Lyra frowned as she broke the embrace. "Is that wise?" she asked without having to explain her reservations.

"It is the wisest thing that either of us has every done," HawkShadow replied with a grin. "We will put our faith in Kaltara to make our a marriage a long and happy one."

"And if He decides differently," added StarWind, "we are ready to accept His judgment. HawkShadow and I have already discussed this at great lengths. Our minds are made up."

"Talking to either one of you when your minds are made up is bad enough," chuckled Lyra. "I will not even attempt to second guess your resolve, but will we have time to put together a wedding here on such short notice?"

"We will invite only the witnesses," answered HawkShadow. "We have chosen Goral and StormSong to witness for us."

"But the others will want to wish you well," frowned Lyra.

"Others may come if their tasks are complete," shrugged HawkShadow, "but we do not intend to slow down the preparations for the Motangan attack. A simple ceremony is all we ask for."

"And your blessings," added StarWind.

"My blessings?" smiled the Star of Sakova. "You shall certainly receive my blessings and my prayers. When do you wish to do this?"

HawkShadow whistled loudly, and Goral and StormSong suddenly appeared. StormSong was carrying a bunch of wildflowers and handed them to StarWind.

"Now would be a good time," the assassin grinned.

* * *

"Come on," shouted the Motangan general, "get those wagons loaded. The sun is already setting, and this caravan was supposed to be out of here this morning."

The black-cloaked mage stood beside the general and shook his head in disbelief. "Do you think your men could work any slower?" he scowled. "Premer Doralin is certainly going to be asking questions about this delay, and I will not take the blame for it."

"As you have made clear all afternoon," snapped the general. "You file your report, and I will file mine. There is something spooky about this city of Alamar. All day I have had men coming to me and telling me that the supplies were not where they were supposed to be. It is almost magical how things have been moved around."

"What are you suggesting?" frowned the mage. "Are you accusing my mages of hampering your efforts to load the supply caravans?"

"I made no such accusation," retorted the general, "but it is curious that things are not where we left them. It certainly is not the fault of all these cats that have suddenly invaded the city. You tell me

how it has happened."

"I will tell you," countered the mage. "Your men have probably been drinking again and have no idea where they stored the supplies when they came off the ships. Do not even think of pinning the blame for your incompetence on my mages. With ten thousand men you surely should be able to handle the shipment of supplies without magical help."

"You handle your mages," snapped the general as he strode briskly towards the caravan, "and leave the handling of my men to me."

The general was fuming as he approached the caravan. Dealing with mages always set him off on a rampage and he decided to get away while he still had some vestige of calm within him.

"What is the hold up this time?" the general bellowed at the officer in charge of the caravan.

"Sixty crates of smoked meat are missing," the officer replied with exasperation. "I personally saw them loaded into the cellar of one of the destroyed inns, but the crates are not there now. The caravan cannot leave without them."

"Are they being stolen?" the general asked with concern as he started to calm down.

"I don't think so," shrugged the officer. "Everything else that was missing has turned up elsewhere, some of it in the most illogical places. I think the city is haunted by spirits."

"Don't be ridiculous," scowled the general. "Spirits do not move crates of meat around. It is more likely a band of your men that do not want to make the journey into the forests. Find the culprits and execute them. That will end these annoying movements of supplies."

"I can hardly do that and load this caravan at the same time," sighed the officer. "I will make a map for the next shipments from Duran. Every crate will be numbered and stored in a specific location, and I will assign guards to watch over it until the next caravan is loaded."

"I like that idea," brightened the general. "It is too late for your caravan to leave today. Tell your men to find those sixty crates and load them. Your caravan will leave at dawn. The sooner they find the crates, the sooner they can go to sleep."

"I will see to it," saluted the officer. "We will leave promptly at dawn."

The general nodded with satisfaction and left the caravan. He returned to his headquarters in the old schoolhouse once used by the Omungans to teach magic. As soon as he entered the schoolhouse, the kitchen staff scurried to prepare the evening meal.

The general and his staff sat down in the dining room and talked

amicably as the kitchen staff provided a feast for the officers. Several hours later, the general and his staff turned in for the night. All over the partially destroyed city of Alamar, soldiers bedded down for the night, well fed and comfortable in the buildings that remained standing.

* * *

The alley was dark, although the sky was studded with brilliant stars. The pale orb of the moon was just rising over the horizon as the small black cat darted along the alleyway. It ran openly down the center of the alley, confident that the only Motangans awake were those sentries guarding the perimeter of the city. They were of no concern to the small cat.

The cat reached its destination, a window near the door to a large mansion once owned by a wealthy Omungan. There it moved into the darkest of shadows and waited. It did not have long to wait. The cat tilted its head upward as it caught the new scent drifting lightly on the wind. It purred softly as it listened intently for the sound of footsteps that were sure to follow.

In the dim light of the city, the cat saw a dozen Chula warriors enter the mouth of the alley. Without waiting for them to arrive, the cat leaped onto the windowsill and entered the mansion. It made a quick circuit of the interior of the building where over a hundred Motangan soldiers were sleeping. It found no one awake. The cat returned to the door to the alleyway and instantly vanished. In the cat's place stood a Chula shaman. The shaman opened the door to the alley and silently greeted the dozen warriors outside.

With swift hand signals, the shaman gave orders to the warriors. The warriors dispersed throughout the building while the shaman waited to see if his assistance would be needed. Within minutes, the warriors began to gather at the door, their knives dripping with Motangan blood. There were no cries of alarm issued, and the shaman immediately transformed into a cat and dashed through the open door and into the alleyway. It hurried to the next building on its list, knowing that other groups of Chula were working just as hard all over the city. It was a race to see how many Motangans could be killed before an alarm was issued to wake the city up.

Several blocks away, a tawny kitten led a group of cats into the alleyway alongside an inn. When the kitten halted, a dozen cats halted beside it. It was a strange sight to behold as the dozen cats formed a semicircle around the kitten and sat down as if they were preparing to listen to a lecture. In the blinking of an eye, they all disappeared. In their place stood twelve head shaman from various tribes in a semicircle. In the center stood Ukaro, the head shaman of the Zatong tribe, and the father of the Torak. The shamans looked attentively

towards their leader.

"There are a hundred black-cloaks inside," Ukaro warned softly. "They would have to be quite foolish not to have magically alarmed this building. Our task here is not one of speed, but of stealth. If any alarm is given, you are to attack without regard to stealth, but until that time, tread softly and take no chances of being discovered."

"Are you saying that entering through windows is unacceptable?" asked one of the shaman.

"I must suspect that it is," nodded Ukaro. "I will not underestimate my opponents."

"Then how can we proceed at all?" asked the shaman.

"I plan to enter through the roof," explained Ukaro. "I will take three others with me. The rest of you are to prepare for battle the moment an alarm is sounded. I want every door and window guarded. None of the black-cloaks are to escape. Destroy the building and everyone in it if you must, but do not let a single Motangan mage get outside."

The shamans nodded and Ukaro pointed to three other shamans before transforming into the tawny kitten again. The three chosen Chula mages also transformed into cats and followed the kitten. The kitten raced along the alleyway as if it was its home. It darted around an old cart and leaped onto a large barrel, immediately vaulting further onto the roof over the porch. From the low porch roof, it moved slowly to the corner of the building where a decorative wooden strip ran upward for another two stories. The kitten's sharp claws dug silently into the wood as it climbed vertically upward.

As the other three cats followed, the kitten leaped onto the kitchen chimney. Its nose crinkled with distaste as it sniffed the lazy spiral of smoke drifting upward. Jumping down from the chimney, the kitten raced across the roof to the next chimney. Again it sniffed the air and purred lightly at the absence of smoke. The kitten suddenly disappeared. In its place was a larger bobcat whose limbs were better suited to descend the chimney to the fireplace below.

The bobcat slowly climbed down the inside of the chimney, black soot soiling its pristine fur. With its paws stretched out to embrace the opposite walls, the descent was slow and agonizing, but the results were pleasing. The bobcat entered a large sleeping chamber that contained only a single mage. It moved softly across the room and halted alongside the bed. Transforming back into human form, Ukaro swiftly used one hand to cover the victim's mouth while the other plunged a knife into the Motangan's heart. The Motangan's eyes opened briefly in horror, but his death was quick.

Ukaro turned and saw his three fellow shamans in human form. He nodded to them and pointed to the door. The shaman closest to the

door eased it open and peeked out. His body disappeared into the hallway and the other shamans followed. In the hallway, the shamans split up, each heading for a different room. They slowly and methodically cleared the upper floor of Motangan mages and were starting to move down to the next level when a horn blared outside the building. The horn was quickly joined by others, and Ukaro knew that the time for stealth was over.

Shouts rang out from below the shamans. Ukaro signaled with his hands, and the Chula retreated up the steps to the uppermost level of the inn. Black cloaks were clearly visible down the stairwell as the Motangan mages reacted to the alarm.

The mages raced to the ground level and threw open the front door. Twirling blades of light immediately sliced through their bodies and panic erupted inside the inn. Some mages tried the windows and the back door, only to meet with a similar fate as blades of light sliced through their bodies.

“Stay away from the windows,” shouted a Motangan mage. “We are surrounded, but I have a plan. Gather around me.”

Ukaro nodded to his fellow shamans and crept down the stairs. They reached the second level and continued downward. Half way down the last flight of steps, Ukaro halted as he saw a large mass of black cloaks milling around the man who must have taken command. Ukaro had no need to signal to his fellow Chula. He stepped down one more step and stooped to give the others a clearer view.

As Ukaro unleashed his blades of light, several others whisked past his shoulders. The magical blades sliced into the clump of black cloaks and body parts flew through the air. A fine red mist hung in the air for several seconds before drifting to the bloody floor. Ukaro immediately rose and raced down the stairs. He avoided the area of carnage and proceeded to check the other rooms of the first floor for any stray mages. Minutes later, the other three shamans joined him.

“The second floor is cleared,” reported one of the Chula.

“As is this one,” nodded Ukaro. “Our business is done here. We need to get out on the streets to help our warriors. Give the signal that we are coming out.”

For the next three hours, the battle raged in Alamar. Some of the Motangans dashed into the street to battle with the Chula warriors, while others sought sanctuary in the partially destroyed buildings. Light blades flashed all over the city, and cats were seen dashing into buildings that had become Motangan refuges. By morning an eerie silence pervaded the old Omungan city. Groups of Chula searched the city, building by building. There were no Motangans left alive.

* * *

“Ophia?” the voice asked softly through the air tunnel.

“She is sleeping,” came the pleasant reply from the roof of the Imperial Palace in Khadoratung. “This is Kaylee. What can I do for the Star of Sakova?”

“Tayo, Kaylee,” smiled Lyra. “I was hoping to find Marak still awake.”

“He is also sleeping,” replied Kaylee. “Is it important?”

“No,” sighed Lyra. “I just returned to StarCity and could not sleep. I was hoping that he was awake.”

Kaylee frowned at the unusual request, but something tugged at her heartstrings. “Wait for a moment, “ she said softly. “I will wake him.”

“That is not necessary,” Lyra replied halfheartedly, but she felt the air tunnel drop on the other end.

A few minutes later, she felt the air tunnel being picked up again.

“Lyra?” asked Marak. “What is wrong?”

“Marak,” replied Lyra, her voice smiling through the air tunnel. “I am sorry to have you awakened. There is nothing wrong that cannot wait until morning.”

“Then let us consider it morning,” Marak replied pleasantly. “I would love to see you. How about meeting me half way?”

“I would like that,” Lyra said, her spirits already rising.

“Then let it be so,” stated Marak. “I will see you shortly.”

The Torak dropped the air tunnel and thanked Kaylee for waking him. He left the roof and stopped off at his quarters to dress in his Torak clan uniform. He took his secret exit from the palace and stole across the city to the temple. In minutes he was in the library of the temple at Changragar. Barely a minute later, the bookshelf moved, and Lyra entered the room. She wore a plain black tunic and black pants. Marak frowned when he saw her garb.

“How is the war going in the Sakova?” he asked apprehensively.

“Not well,” admitted Lyra. “We are losing many good people. Oh, we are getting the better of them odds wise, but I do not think such a trade is worth it. Too many friends are dying, and I almost lost HawkShadow and StarWind yesterday.”

“That would be a severe blow,” nodded Marak as he embraced Lyra to comfort her. “Why are you up so late? Or have you woken early?”

“Late,” answered Lyra. “My people demanded that I remove myself from the battlefield. They are afraid that I will be hurt. If I did not care for them so much, I would be quite angry. It reminds me of my father and how he refused to let me train with the boys.”

“And you always found a way around his edicts,” laughed Marak, “if I remember the stories correctly.”

“You remember well enough,” Lyra laughed before turning

serious again. “I don’t like this feeling of helplessness.”

“You are far from helpless,” soothed the Torak. “I heard from Ukaro this evening. He should be attacking Alamar as we speak. With Kaltara’s help, Alamar will be back in friendly hands by morning.”

“Then we can begin to starve the Motangans,” brightened Lyra. “That is good news. I was getting concerned because StarWind found out that Duran has been reopened by the Motangans.”

“Then we must shut it down again,” shrugged Marak as he broke the embrace and began pacing.

“We can’t this time,” frowned Lyra. “There are thousands of Motangans defending it, and they have created defensive works to resist any attempts to reclaim the city.”

“We have no choice,” Marak said adamantly as he stopped pacing and stared at the Star of Sakova. “We cannot allow the Motangans to use Duran as a supply port. It must be retaken or destroyed.”

“Destroyed?” frowned Lyra. “What are you thinking?”

“I am thinking that Kaltara works in mysterious ways,” grinned Marak. “Perhaps you were chased from the battlefield for a purpose. Come with me. We have some work to do.”

The Star of Sakova frowned with curiosity, but she followed Marak out of the temple. The Chula guards were surprised by their presence, but they were not disturbed. Marak led Lyra into the forest and along a narrow trail. Fifteen minutes later they emerged from the forest in a large clearing near a clear alpine lake. Curled up on the shore of the lake was a huge dragon. Myka raised her head lazily and watched the humans approach.

“I am running out of places to hide from you,” snorted the dragon. “At least you have brought your warrior woman with you this time. I guess I will have to be nice.”

“That should tax your small mind,” chuckled the Torak. “Get your lazy body off the ground. We have adventure to pursue.”

“Adventure?” Myka perked up. “You could have at least giving me some notice.”

“You would probably find a better solution to the problem and that would hurt my pride,” grinned the Torak. “Be glad that Lyra and I chose to include you in this adventure.”

“Because you need to fly somewhere no doubt,” taunted the dragon. “What is this adventure?”

“I will explain it while we fly somewhere,” replied Marak.

Chapter 15

Helping Hand

The dragon glided through the dawn sky, banking into a lazy spiral as she circled over the coastal city of Duran. Not many Motangans were awake and moving around, but thousands of tents dotted the city.

"There are more than a thousand Motangan soldiers here," frowned Lyra, her arms wrapped lovingly around Marak as they sat on the back of the dragon.

"Easily," agreed the Torak. "Vand is taking no chances of another attack on his supplies. If we even had the ships to attack, we would lose tens of thousands of men trying to retake the city. He is smart enough to understand that his armies must eat to fight."

"There is no way that the three of us are going to attack Duran," retorted Lyra. "That would not be adventure; it would be suicide."

"Land on the Wall, Myka," instructed the Torak.

The dragon broke out of the spiral and glided towards the Wall of Mermidion, a mammoth cliff that ran for hundreds of leagues and isolated the city of Duran from the rest of the Sakova. When Myka landed on the top of the Wall of Mermidion, Marak and Lyra slid off. The sun was just beginning to peek above the horizon and hundreds of Motangan soldiers began emerging from their tents.

"What exactly do you have in mind?" the Star of Sakova asked the Torak.

"If I remember your stories about the Scroll of Kaltara," smiled Marak, "it states that the Wall of Mermidion was formed from the ground taken from the Wound of Kaltara."

"You remember well," nodded Lyra. "It was a demonstration of the power of Kaltara, and of His anger at the Sakovans for disobeying Him."

"So the Wall of Mermidion was created by the hand of Kaltara?" asked Marak.

"Of course," Lyra frowned as she wondered what Marak was alluding to.

"Then the Wall of Mermidion can once again be moved by the hand of Kaltara," grinned Marak.

"You brought us here to pray?" puzzled Lyra. "We could have used the prayer chamber at Changragar. It is a holy place."

"Prayer works wonders," smiled Marak, "but that is not what I

had in mind. You, Lyra, are the hand of Kaltara."

Lyra's eyes opened wide as she stared at the Torak. Her mouth opened to speak, but nothing came out.

"You are wiser than I gave you credit for, Torak," chuckled the dragon. "This will indeed be an adventurous day."

"You can't be serious?" Lyra finally uttered. "Do you have any idea of the magnitude of power that you are requesting from me?"

"Do you have any appreciation for the powers bestowed upon you by Kaltara?" countered Marak with a grin.

"I value my powers greatly," frowned Lyra, "but I don't think such a thing is possible. I doubt that hundreds of mages could even accomplish it."

"Kaltara has blessed you with more than just your magical powers," declared the Torak. "He has also given you wisdom. Use your mind, Lyra. Look at the Wall upon which we stand and tell me what you see."

"I see rock," frowned Lyra, "massive amounts of rock. The cliffs are huge and towering."

"Which consist of vertical strata," hinted the Torak.

"As it should," nodded Lyra. "It once sat at the bottom of the Wound of Kaltara."

"The many layers of sediment compressed into rock layers over the ages have been lifted out of the Wound of Kaltara and stood upon their edges," grinned the Torak. "Instead of layer upon layer of horizontal rock, we now have huge vertical slabs.

"And all I would have to do is separate a few layers of the strata," the Star of Sakova nodded. "Gravity would do the rest. You are brilliant, Marak. Whole sections of the Wall of Mermidion could be sent tumbling down on Duran."

"Could and should," smiled Marak. "Let us bury forever the city that the Motangans have seized to further our destruction."

"I will need your help," Lyra said distractedly as she walked along one of the faults, staring at the small cracks in the surface that separated the various colored layers. "If we have any chance of making this happen, I will have to separate the layers along one of the faults slowly, or just the top section will crumble off."

"Just tell me what you want me to do," smiled Marak. "I am in your service."

Lyra grinned and looked up at the Torak. "And I intend to keep you there," she chuckled. "We will have to do this from above the Wall," she continued seriously. "I think we can peel off the three outermost layers in one shot, but I will need to do it slowly. The deeper I go, the harder I will need to concentrate. Myka can guide me by flying along the section of the Wall that resides above Duran, and

turning around when we reach the limits of the city. I will need you, Marak, to hold onto me tightly. I am not sure how I will feel when my power is drained. You will also have to decide when I have done enough."

"Decide?" frowned Marak. "What do you mean?"

"I am only going to separate the layers a tiny amount," explained Lyra, "otherwise the outer layer will just crumble a bit at a time. That would not suffice to destroy the entire city. In fact, it would probably alert the mages below of what we are up to. I have no idea what their powers are, and I do not want to find out today. When you feel that I have gone deep enough to cause the entire layer to fall at once, you need to direct force bolts into the crevice. Direct them as deep into the crevice as you can, and make them increasingly powerful as you go deeper."

"So the first force bolts will only widen the crevice, but the more powerful ones will start the destruction down deeper?" asked Marak.

"Exactly," nodded Lyra. "If the first ones are too powerful, you will blow off small chunks of the wall. That will not do what we want as the debris will merely fall to the bottom of the Wall. We need the whole wall to come down at once if we wish the destruction to reach the harbor."

"I understand," nodded Marak as he helped Lyra onto Myka's back.

Marak scrambled up the dragon's back and sat behind Lyra. He wrapped his arms tightly around her as Myka leaped into the air. The dragon climbed in altitude as she headed for a spot of the Wall where the limits of Duran ended. Myka banked sharply and turned around to make the first run over the selected section of the Wall of Mermidion. Marak watched with interest as Lyra concentrated and began casting her spell. Small stones popped into the air, and a loud cracking sound drifted up to them as a small fissure appeared in the Wall.

"Slower, Myka," Lyra demanded.

The dragon's wings began to beat faster, but her forward motion slowed.

"That is as slow as I can go without tossing you two about," declared Myka. "We are practically at a walk."

Lyra did not respond as she continued to concentrate on the fissure. The crack that Lyra created was barely large enough for one to stick the tips of their fingers in. When Myka reached the northernmost limit, she banked sharply and reversed course. Lyra concentrated on enlarging the fissure, both in width and depth.

"This is going better than I would have thought possible," Lyra said softly. "The layers are most willing to be separated."

"They have remained in their unnatural position for a long time,"

smiled Marak as he watched the fissure widen.

After the second pass, the fissure was large enough to put your arm into. Marak could not see how deep it went. As Myka started the third pass, small chunks of stone tumbled from the Wall to the city below. Although the land directly below the Wall was mostly farmland and outside the limits of the city proper, shouts arose from the Motangans before the third pass was complete.

“We have been noticed,” announced Myka. “Soon the whole city will be gazing up at us.”

“I am almost done,” replied Lyra. “At the end of this pass, take us higher and more inland. That will keep the Motangan mages from being able to target us.”

Marak stared down at the crevice, which was now large enough for a person to slip into. He looked down at the city of Duran and saw thousands of people running around and pointing upward. Fireballs flew upwards, but they could not reach the dragon. Unexpectedly, lightning flashed out of the clear sky. The lightning bolt missed the trio, but it was close enough to make Marak’s skin tingle.

“Take us up and inland,” shouted Lyra as they reached the end of the third run.

Myka instantly obeyed as she banked sharply and climbed powerfully. More lightning flashes lit the morning sky, but they were not close enough to cause any harm.

“What now?” asked Marak as the dragon soared over the Sakova so far inland that Duran was no longer visible.

“We have to make one more run,” declared the Star of Sakova. “There will be a short change of plans, though. Marak, I want you to concentrate on the less powerful force bolts. Just widen the fissure for me. I will sit backwards and follow your force bolts with my own. Mine will be more powerful and deeper. Myka, I am going to want you to fly much faster this trip. Gauge your speed on how quickly Marak can throw his force bolts. He must toss one every hundred paces, but the faster we do this the better. Once, my force bolts hit the bottom of the crevice, the wall will start to fall. It is best if it all goes down together.”

“How quickly can you perform your magic, Torak?” quipped the dragon.

“How quickly can you fly, dragon?” retorted the Torak. “I am skilled with both hands. If I only need one every hundred paces, a fast gallop would not be too fast.”

“Fortunately,” snorted the dragon as it landed in a clearing in the Sakova, “I am not a horse. Arrange your bodies as you want them. Let me know when to start this final run.”

Marak unwrapped his arms, and Lyra slid past him. She turned

around and sat facing the dragon's tail.

"You will feel me falling," frowned Lyra, "won't you?"

"You have never had a safer seat," chuckled the dragon. "Are you ready?"

Lyra said that she was ready and the dragon leaped into the air. Lyra instinctively placed her hands on the dragon's scales and heard Myka laugh. The dragon banked slowly in a long low flight far to the south of Duran. When she reached the Wall of Mermidion, she turned to the north and skimmed the surface of the cliff.

"Here it comes," announced the dragon. "I will go slightly higher and bank to one side so that you can use both hands. If I am going too fast, shout quickly."

The dragon suddenly shot up a hundred paces and banked steeply to one side. Marak saw the fissure coming and readied himself for the attack. He started throwing force bolts as quickly as he could. Lyra could only see the crevice after they had passed over it. She directed her force bolts deep into the yawning fissure.

"Faster!" Lyra shouted as she saw the vertical rock layer begin to sway.

Lightning bolts flashed in the sky again, and the Motangans in Duran began to shout hysterically. Thousands of men raced to the waterfront as the Wall of Mermidion began to waver. Unfortunately for the Motangans, there were no ships in port to swim out to.

Myka suddenly leveled out of her bank and soared upward, her tail coming forward to secure Lyra. Lightning crackled throughout the sky as the Motangan mages attempted to extract revenge for their coming defeat, but they could not anticipate the dragon's moves as Myka zigzagged across the sky. Myka leveled out at a high altitude as the lightning ceased. Marak looked back at Duran and wondered if they had failed. The Wall of Mermidion still stood over the city of Duran, although the Motangans continued to run around hysterically.

Then it happened. The Wall wobbled like a man unsteady from too much drink. As Marak watched, one end of the Wall leaned slowly outward to hang precariously over the city. The rest of the Wall followed, and suddenly the entire layer of rock fell outward as if pushed by a mighty hand. Millions of tons of rock slammed down on the city of Duran, and well into the sea beyond it. The air thundered in a tremendous reverberating clap as the ground shook for hundreds of leagues around. A huge cloud of brown dust rose skyward, blotting out the sun and casting the ancient city into a veil of darkness.

The dragon moved deftly to avoid the brown column of dust as she dropped altitude and circled back towards the city. Marak peered through the dimness to gaze upon the results of the mission.

"You would never believe that a city had once existed there,"

Lyra said softly. “I feel sad that it has come to destroying our own cities to protect our people.”

“There is only one person alive who is from Duran,” replied Marak, “and I do not think he would disapprove. At least his kinsmen are now properly buried.”

“Along with thousands of Motangans,” added the dragon. “I must get out of this foul air.”

“Take us home,” Lyra said to the dragon, “but land somewhere first so I will not be forced to view your tail for the entire journey.”

* * *

The Motangan soldier saw the officer approaching the campfire. He grabbed a spare mug and poured some hot coffee into it. He walked a few paces towards the approaching officer and handed him the mug.

“This wasteland chills you at night,” smiled the soldier.

“No one said Fakara would be a paradise,” chuckled the officer. “Are you on sentry duty?”

“No,” the soldier shook his head. “I took my turn hours ago. I just couldn’t get back to sleep.”

“Well, there will be no time for you to catch up on your sleep now,” the officer said as he sipped the coffee and gazed up at the sky. “Dawn will be here soon.”

“I prefer the daylight,” shrugged the soldier. “We never had such dark nights on Motanga.”

“That’s because there isn’t a living sole for leagues around us,” replied the officer. “The nearest torch is probably back in Meliban. The campfires give off enough light to navigate the campsite.”

“I have no problem finding my way around the camp,” offered the soldier. “It is beyond our camp that I want to see.”

The officer turned and frowned at the soldier. “I do not tolerate cowards in my command,” snapped the officer. “You had better adjust your attitude.”

“I am not a coward,” balked the soldier. “I will fight anyone at any time, but I would still like to see my enemy when he strikes. What are we doing out here in the middle of nowhere? There is nothing here for us to guard.”

“We are following orders,” the officer retorted harshly. “That is all that you need to know.”

The soldier shook his head with disgust and sat back down next to the campfire. The officer turned away with scorn and stared into the dark of the night. After a while he calmed down and considered the soldier’s question. He knew the lad was a fearless fighter, but he could not stand the thought of cowardice in any of his men. Finally, he turned and looked at the soldier again.

“We were meant to create a corridor for the Emperor to pass through,” the officer said softly. “Now that that is over with, I suspect that we will be returning to Meliban.”

“Aren’t we going to track down the Fakarans?” asked the soldier.

“We will,” nodded the officer, “but we will regroup in Meliban first. If it is any consolation, Premer Doralin was against our being out here, too. He felt we would leave ourselves too exposed, but I guess he worries too much. All that matters is that we have accomplished our goal. Our next outing will be to battle with the cowardly Fakarans.”

“I look forward to that,” smiled the soldier. “I just feel like I am a sitting target out here.”

“Do not spread that feeling to others,” warned the officer. “For those who do not know you, it smells of cowardice.”

The soldier nodded silently and stared into his mug of coffee, ashamed that he had presented such an image to his officer. His eyebrows rose curiously as he watched the coffee in the mug vibrate. At first he thought his hands might be shaking so he placed the mug on the ground and continued to stare at it. The light from the campfire was not strong, so he wondered if his eyes were playing tricks on him. He leaned forward and continued staring into the mug.

“Do they have earthquakes here in Fakara?” asked the officer.

The soldier’s head snapped up, and he stared at the officer. “Why do you ask?” he questioned.

“Can’t you feel it?” inquired the officer. “The ground is rumbling as if it wants to break free of itself. I have only felt that feeling once before, and it was a minor earthquake at the south end of the island.”

“That explains the coffee,” nodded the soldier. “I thought I was going crazy.”

The officer ignored the soldier’s remarks as he stared into the darkness. The rumbling grew even greater, and the officer became clearly agitated.

“Sound the alarm!” shouted the officer.

“What is it?” the soldier yelled as he abandoned his mug and leaped to his feet.

“Just sound the alarm,” snapped the officer.

The soldier raced to the central campfire and began ringing the bell that hung from a post. Soldiers all over the campsite shouted and began crawling out of their tents. The soldier raced back to the officer’s side.

“Do you think we will be swallowed up in an earthquake?” asked the soldier.

“I do not know what it is,” replied the officer as the ground began to vibrate beneath his feet, “but it is not something to sleep through. It almost sounds like…”

The officer stopped talking and shook his head in disbelief.

“Sounds like what?” prompted the soldier.

“It sounds like horses pounding the plains,” the officer said softly, “but it couldn’t possibly be.”

“Why not?” frowned the soldier. “The Fakarans ride horses. Maybe they are charging towards us.”

“It is too many horses,” the officer shook his head as the dawn began to lighten the sky somewhat. “It sounds like a full mounted army would sound as they galloped past the reviewing stand, but that is because of your closeness to them. I still see nothing out there. It must be something else.”

“It’s not something else,” shouted the soldier as he pointed frantically. “Fakarans!” he yelled to warn the others.

The officer stood frozen for a moment as he stared in disbelief. The charging horses were still quite distant, but they spread from left to right as far as the officer could see.

“Ready archers on the eastern front!” shouted the officer. “We are under attack!”

Shouts tore through the encampment as Motangan soldiers scattered, grabbing their bows and quivers and taking up positions along the eastern perimeter of the camp.

“Ready archers on the western front!” came a distant shout.

“Find that fool and silence him,” the officer snarled to the soldier beside him. “The last thing we need right now is confusion. I will not tolerate a man in my service that doesn’t know east from west.”

The soldier turned and raced towards the voice that was still calling for archers to guard the western front. He zeroed in on another officer and raced towards him.

“The enemy is coming from the east,” panted the soldier as he slid to a halt next to the officer. “You are confusing the men.”

The officer turned and glared at the soldier. Unexpectedly, the officer’s hand came up swiftly and slapped the soldier’s face. The soldier stumbled backwards and tripped over the corner of a tent. He fell to the ground and rolled painfully over the tent stake. The officer continued to rally troops to the western front and the soldier shook his head in disbelief. As he struggled to his feet, wondering what to do, he saw the Fakarans charging. Fear gripped the soldier as he realized that they were going to be attacked from both fronts simultaneously.

The soldier picked up his bow and moved away from the officer who had hit him. He nocked an arrow as the other archers were firing. He saw several horses tumble to the ground and other riders fall from their mounts, but there was no victory cry from the Motangan soldiers. A hail of arrows flew into the Motangan ranks as the horsemen continued to advance. The soldier stood with his arrow

nocked, frozen by his fear. The huge warhorses charged with frightening speed as their riders sent arrow after arrow into the Motangan ranks. The Motangan archers killed entire lines of horsemen, but others immediately took their places, leaping over their fallen brothers. The charge continued unabated.

The soldier watched as the vanguard of the Fakarans dropped their bows and drew their swords, the bows swinging wildly from the leashes that attached them to the horses. The horsemen shouted as they met the Motangan line, cold steel slicing into soldiers as they charged through the encampment. The soldier turned as a horseman rode past him. He let his arrow fly, but it missed its target. He fumbled in his quiver for another arrow as his eyes followed the horseman through the encampment. His eyes grew wide and his jaw dropped as he saw the Fakarans charging through the camp from the other side. He dropped his bow and ran, knowing that none of the Motangans would survive to see the rising sun.

The soldier ran south as fast as his legs would carry him. Fakaran horsemen crisscrossed the encampment, slaying the Motangans with every pass. Horses were everywhere, trampling tents and bodies as they swept through the camp. The war shouts rang loudly from every direction and soon all of the Motangans were fleeing for their lives. The soldier zigzagged southward, dodging the attackers. He never even thought about grabbing for his sword. His only thought was to leave the area of the attack, but the charge of the Fakarans was endless.

The soldier felt the blade slice into his shoulder, throwing him off his stride. He tripped and stumbled to the ground, the searing pain threatening his consciousness. He rolled on the ground in agony, and that is when he saw his fate. Fear closed his throat as he saw the Fakaran horse charging towards him. There was no time to roll out of the way of the horse or get to his feet. There was only time to close his eyes and await death.

* * *

Harmagan reined in his horse next to the Kheri tribe leader. He sheathed his sword and grinned broadly.

“It feels great to back on the plains,” Harmagan laughed loudly. “These Motangans die like villagers.”

“They did this time,” Yojji agreed, “but do not expect it to remain that way. The Motangans are well trained. We were fortunate to catch them sleeping. The next battle will not be as easy now that they have been bloodied.”

“I will keep that in mind,” grinned the Jiadin leader. “What do we do next? Do we attack some more?”

“Not today,” Yojji shook his head. “Your men may resume

wearing their red scarves now. Return to the west and await a message. The free tribes will return to the east."

"Why not continue attacking?" asked Harmagan. "We have over a hundred thousand warriors together. We can kill them all."

"I seriously doubt it," Yojji shook his head. "On these plains they can see forever. Their archers will exact too great a toll on our forces. The only reason we succeeded as well as we did was because of the darkness and the element of surprise. We have lost both of those for the rest of today. Return to your camp and make sure you post watchers. The Motangans will be looking for our encampments."

Chapter 16

Warrior Women

The jaguar raced through the Motangan jungle, leaping fallen trees and swerving around pits of quicksand. The sleek cat reached the edge of the jungle and stared at the dusk sky while it caught its breath. After a short rest, the jaguar followed the edge of the jungle, padding silently through the fine sand of the beach. As the large cat approached its destination, it moved stealthily back into the cover of the dense foliage. A few hundred paces later, the jaguar sat and stared out of the jungle at the lonesome building sitting on the beach on the eastern coast of the Island of Darkness.

The jaguar sat erect for hours, its ears tuned to the sounds of the night, as it observed the nightly routine of the four occupants. It paid careful attention to the flickering lights emanating from the windows. When the last light was extinguished, the large cat purred with satisfaction. If anyone had been watching the jaguar, they would have been puzzled by its sudden disappearance. Even more curious, they would have been baffled by the sudden appearance of the Chula shaman.

Calitora moved silently out of the jungle. He moved swiftly to the side of the building that he had been observing every night for the past week. The shaman eased his way around to the front of the building and slowly opened the front door and slipped inside. He silently closed the door and made his way to the staircase leading upstairs. With carefully placed steps, the shaman slowly climbed the staircase.

As the shaman listened to the snoring of the occupants, he moved into the quieter of the two bedrooms. Two men slept in a large bed, and Calitora moved to the headboard. He drew two knives from his belt. He leaned over the bed and drove the knives into the two sleeping men. One of the Motangan soldiers died quietly, while the other kicked out, hitting the wall with his foot before succumbing to a permanent sleep. Calitora withdrew the knives and crouched next to the bed, waiting to see if the disturbance had been enough to awaken the two men in the neighboring room.

After a few moments of continued snoring from the other room, Calitora rose and padded out of the room. He waited a few minutes to be sure that his victims had not awakened. Feeling confident, the shaman stepped into the second bedroom. As he moved to the

headboard, one of the Motangan's eyes popped open. The man frowned as he stared up at the Chula shaman. Calitora did not hesitate. He immediately shoved a knife through the man's eye. Moving swiftly, the shaman leaned over the bed and cut the second man's throat.

Wiping the blades of his knives on the bed, Calitora left the room, grabbing a lantern as he went by. He climbed the stairs to the third level and threw open the shutters facing the sea. He lit the lantern and leaned out of the window, swinging the light widely from side to side. He kept up his signaling for several minutes before a soft voice addressed him.

"What is your name?" the unseen voice asked.

"I am called Calitora," the shaman answered softly.

"And your message for us is?" questioned the voice.

"The coast is clear," replied Calitora.

"Hang the lantern out the window," instructed the voice. "You are to stand on the beach beneath it. You must remain visible at all times. Do you understand?"

"I understand," replied the Chula shaman.

The shaman felt the air tunnel drop. Calitora removed a knife from his belt and leaned out of the window. He drove the knife into the side of the building and hung the lantern on it. When he was satisfied that the lantern would remain, he descended the stairs and exited the building. He stood under the lantern and waited. Within an hour the Chula shaman saw the outline of a sailboat against the star-studded sky. He waited anxiously as he watched the ship come closer and eventually beach itself. Several men immediately leaped out of the ship and raced towards Calitora, their swords drawn.

"Welcome to the Island of Darkness," the shaman said loudly as he gazed at the men with a discerning eye. "I am Calitora."

"Tayo, Calitora," smiled the leader. "I am Tamar. Are there Motangans in the area?"

"Not this area of the coast," smiled Calitora. "That is why I chose it for your invasion."

Tamar's elven face grinned broadly as he turned and signaled the other passengers on the ship. He turned back to the Chula shaman.

"What of the watchers in the house?" he asked.

"All four of them are dead," assured Calitora as he handed a paper to the elf. "Here. I made a map of the island. I marked in all of the mines and work camps that I could find. I also shaded the areas where the kruls congregate."

"I see that the mine where I found Eltor is on there," smiled a young female elf. "You have done well, Calitora."

"You are the voice from the air tunnel," smiled the shaman.

“She is Princess Alahara,” introduced Tamar. “She is leading this war party.”

The Chula shaman smiled widely and bowed to the elven princess. “I have heard of you,” he grinned. “You are the one called Mistake?”

“I used to be,” nodded the princess. “Tamar, have the word sent to the other ships. We have much to do before dawn, and remove the lantern from the window. It has served its purpose.”

“I would be pleased to retrieve the lantern for you,” offered Calitora. “You must get your people prepared for war.”

“Tamar can handle that,” replied Princess Alahara. “I want you to explain each of the marks on this map of yours. Let’s go into the kitchen and light a lantern of our own.”

The shaman nodded and followed the princess into the house. He passed her in the dark and moved swiftly into the kitchen and lit a lantern. The princess cleared a spot on the table and placed the map down on it.

“You are very young to have such a grave responsibility,” frowned the shaman. “It is good that you have Tamar with you. Has he been to the Island of Darkness before?”

Princess Alahara understood the subtle question that the Chula was trying to ask. She smiled with understanding. “I am indeed young,” she replied, “but I have been to this island twice already. My sister and I rescued our father from the temple in Vandamar, and we are quite capable of leading the elven armies. There will actually be three prongs of the attack. I will lead one. My sister Alastasia will lead another, and my father Avalar will command the third. Would you care to come with us?”

“I was afraid that you would not offer,” grinned the shaman. “I would like that very much.”

“Then you shall,” declared the princess. “Now, explain your map while we wait for the armies to come ashore.”

The Chula shaman began pointing to each notation on the map and discussed his observations of each place. Calitora proved to be a wealth of information, having spent many days spying on the enemy positions. Half an hour into the discussion, King Avalar, and Princess Alastasia entered. Princess Alahara introduced everyone.

“I sent Tamar on ahead with your army,” the king said to Princess Alahara. “We needed room on the beach to unload the rest of the troops.”

Princess Alahara nodded and urged the shaman to continue. It took another half an hour for the telling of the complete map. When Calitora was done, King Avalar took command of the meeting.

“This sector is yours, Alahara, “ the king said tapping the map. “I

will leave the details of how to attack it up to you. Alastasia, this sector is yours. I will take the third. If there are no questions, I suggest we get our armies on their way. There is much to do before the dawn."

Both princesses silently nodded their approval. The elven king smiled at his daughters and said, "Let no pride interfere with your tasks. If your army gets bogged down, let the rest of us know. Together we shall conquer this evil island."

"What about noncombatants?" asked Princes Alastasia.

"If they hold no weapons," instructed King Avalar, "they are to be spared and held captive. We will not slaughter innocent people, but if they choose to take up arms against us, they will have chosen to be our enemy, and the death that comes with such a decision will be their reward."

"I have only one map," interjected the shaman. "I did not know that there would be three armies."

"Bring it with us," Princess Alahara responded. "As soon as you can make copies, I will have them delivered to the others."

"Perhaps that is what my task was truly meant to be," frowned Calitora. "I will stay here and create duplicates for your father and sister. When they are done, I will catch up to you."

"We will be traveling rather fast," frowned Princess Alahara. "You will never catch up to us."

"I will catch up," grinned Calitora. "I will not even need to know which way you have gone. Your scent will guide me. Advise your troops to save their arrows if a jaguar is seen."

Princess Alahara grinned broadly and nodded. She embraced her sister and then her father in a farewell and then turned and ran out of the building.

* * *

"They are filing into the canyon," came the voice through the air tunnel.

"Have the archers take their positions," StarWind instructed StormSong. "ValleyBreeze, I want your mages up on the ridge, but out of view. Do not let the enemy know that there are mages up there."

The two Sakovan women ran off to instruct their groups. HawkShadow stared at the mouth of the canyon and frowned.

"What do you have planned?" he asked StarWind.

"The plan that we laid out is what I am following," replied StarWind, "with one minor exception. I don't know what the Motangan mages are capable of. If they use their skills to counterattack, we will learn something of their capabilities before we commit our mages. I think it is important."

"I agree," nodded HawkShadow, "but the light blade spell can kill

far more Motangans than archers can."

"Granted," agreed StarWind, "but this battle will have both our forces and the Motangans fairly well exposed. To put our mages on the frontline would be to invite disaster. I will use them once we see what the Motangan response is. Are Didyk and Romero in place?"

"They are," answered the assassin. "Didyk's troops have the south end of the ridge covered, and Romero is on the north. Everyone is in place."

"Then let's get up on the ridge," suggested StarWind. "I want to see how the Motangans react to our trap."

HawkShadow led the way up the steep rocky path that led to the ridge overlooking the canyon and beyond. The ridge was an odd formation in the Sakovan heartland. A bare plateau of rock rose thirty paces above the ground and ran for two leagues in length. It was half a league in width, the perfect place to ambush the enemy. Almost directly in the center of the ridge was a canyon passing through it. The vanguard of the Motangan force had already entered the canyon and would be met with a hail of arrows as they emerged out the other end. StarWind and HawkShadow had just reached the top of the ridge when they heard the shouting from below.

"The Motangans march swiftly," frowned HawkShadow. "Or do you think our people reacted too quickly?"

"The Motangans are a marching army," shrugged StarWind. "I suspect that they are used to covering ground quickly. Let's head to the far edge of the ridge. The Motangan mages will not be in the vanguard."

The spymaster led the assassin across the ridge at a run. They passed hundreds of archers who were firing their arrows into the canyon below, but that was not what StarWind wanted to see. They reached the far edge of the ridge and cautiously moved up behind the Sakovan archers who were firing at the congregating Motangan troops as they became bunched up at the entrance to the canyon.

Suddenly, the ridge shook with the force of an earthquake. StarWind lost her footing and tumbled to the surface of the ridge. HawkShadow caught her before her head smashed against the bare rock surface. He helped her back to her feet as another quake shook the ridge.

StarWind stared in horror as she gazed along the ranks of the Sakovan archers. Most of them were flat on the ridge, having fallen as StarWind had. Worse, the line of archers had many gaps in it; archers were missing.

"Many went over the edge," HawkShadow said as he joined StarWind in surveying the troops.

"Move two paces back from the edge," shouted StarWind. "Pass

the word along. Stay away from the edge."

The word spread quickly, but the order was unnecessary. The Sakovan archers had already retreated a bit to avoid their comrades' fate.

"Drop to the ground," urged HawkShadow as another quake hit. "We can crawl forward and see what the enemy is up to."

StarWind dropped to the ground without comment. HawkShadow smiled at his bride and then began crawling forward towards the edge. Arrows were flying up and over the edge, as the Motangan archers hoped for a lucky hit on the Sakovans. One arrow struck perilously close to StarWind, but she ignored it and crawled alongside HawkShadow to peer down at the enemy. A sea of red uniforms filled the forest for as far as she could see. The enemy troops were flowing in three separate directions. One group was heading for the entrance to the canyon, while the flanks were peeling off to go around the ridge.

"It is like a swarm of ants attacking," frowned StarWind as another quake shook the ridge. "They will go around and over us if we stay here long enough."

"Look off to your right," urged HawkShadow. "It looks like the entire contingent of Motangan mages are gathered together to shake the ridge."

StarWind's eyes moved to the right and saw the black bubble in the red tide. She saw the Motangan mages act in concert as another quake rippled the surface of the ridge.

"They are powerful," StarWind said with appreciation, "but they should never group together like that."

HawkShadow grinned as StarWind rolled onto her back and wove an air tunnel to ValleyBreeze.

"One third of the way south from the canyon is a group of a thousand mages," the spymaster said into the air tunnel. "I want our mages to attack that group with light blades. Make sure the attack is coordinated and unexpected. We will not get a second chance like this."

ValleyBreeze assured StarWind that the mages would strike a telling blow. The spymaster dropped the air tunnel and rolled back onto her stomach as another quake struck the ridge.

"I hope she hurries," StarWind said as she saw that the Sakovan archers were being made useless by the constant quakes. "The enemy is probably already climbing the face of this ridge."

"Then they will be having a hard time of it," replied HawkShadow. "The earthquakes will hinder them more than they hinder our archers. You were right about not having a second chance at this," he added. "Once we attack them, the Motangan mages will

never group together again like they have today. They are not stupid."

Moments later a brilliant flash emanated from further along the ridge. StarWind watched as a hundred light blades flew into the black swarm. The air instantly became a fine red mist as the Motangan mages were sliced into pieces. A second wave of light blades quickly followed the first. The quakes suddenly stopped as the surviving black-cloaked mages fought their way through the Motangan troops in an effort to get out of the killing zone. A third wave of light blades ripped into the soldiers near the previous killing zone in an attempt to slay the remaining mages.

StarWind leaped to her feet and moved back from the edge. She quickly wove an air tunnel to ValleyBreeze.

"Start on the Motangan troops," StarWind ordered as HawkShadow rose and rallied the archers back to their positions. "Decimate the vanguard and keep it up until the Motangans turn and retreat."

StarWind turned and watched as the Sakovan mages started to attack the red uniforms. LifeTender ran up to StarWind, panting from a fast run.

"General Romero's position has been overrun," reported LifeTender. "The Motangans are coming around the north end of the ridge."

"Send SunChaser's people to reinforce the position," ordered StarWind. "See if you can find some mages who know the light blade spell. Have them help her out."

"ValleyBreeze has all the good warrior mages," answered LifeTender. "The rest are mostly healing mages."

"Use any mage that can throw a light blade," interjected HawkShadow. "As long as they don't hit our own troops, we don't care how proficient they are with the spell."

LifeTender nodded and ran off. HawkShadow drew his sword and started to move away from StarWind.

"Where are you going?" asked the spymaster.

"I am going to help SunChaser," answered HawkShadow. "We have a chance here for a great victory if we can force the Motangans to retreat, but Romero's position must hold for that to be true."

"Take StormSong with you," nodded StarWind. "And Goral. They are much better warriors than archers."

HawkShadow nodded and dashed across the ridge. He scrambled down the steep rocky path and was met by a grinning StormSong at the bottom.

"StarWind told me the plan," grinned StormSong as she handed the reins of a choka to the assassin. "Goral will meet us on the way. He was on the north section of the ridge"

HawkShadow leaped onto the choka and raced northward with StormSong alongside him. They passed the mouth of the canyon and saw that only a few Motangan troops were trying to get through it. Moments later Goral raced towards them riding Bertha, his oversized choka. He was leading another choka behind him.

“What is the spare choka for?” asked StormSong.

“For SunChaser,” answered Goral. “I was above Romero’s position when he was overwhelmed. The only chance of stemming the tide at the north end of the ridge is to take out the officer leading the charge. The Motangan soldiers have attempted to retreat several times, but he keeps goading them onward. It will be up to us to get that officer. He has been keeping himself out of the battle and in a position that our archers cannot reach.”

StormSong nodded as the three Sakovan warriors rushed towards the conflict. Flashes of light in the distance let them know that the fight was near. The three warriors halted behind the line of archers where SunChaser was directing the battle.

“We can’t hold them,” announced SunChaser. “We keep killing them, but they keep charging. They have more soldiers than we have arrows.”

“Mount up,” ordered HawkShadow as he scanned the enemy lines looking for the officer.

“Near the base of the ridge,” Goral said as he watched the assassin’s eyes move over the enemy.

“What do you three have in mind?” asked SunChaser.

“We must turn this attack,” explained StormSong, “or we risk losing the entire battle. If these Motangans get past us, the ridge will be surrounded.”

“I thought we were supposed to break off the battle after we bloodied them?” frowned SunChaser.

“That was before we saw a chance to make them retreat in defeat,” replied HawkShadow. “All of the other fronts belong to us. This one must as well.”

“We need to kill that officer,” Goral pointed to the man leading the attack.

“We will never get near him,” frowned SunChaser. “He is out of range for our archers.”

“Then your people must open up a corridor for us,” retorted StormSong. “Let Romero handle it. Your skill will be useful in reaching the officer.”

“Romero is dead,” SunChaser replied as she waved LifeTender over. “LifeTender, I am placing you in charge. We need a corridor opened up to get to that officer. Can you do it?”

LifeTender followed SunChaser’s finger and saw the officer who

was staying out of the thick of the battle. She frowned heavily and sighed, but she nodded.

"I will try," replied the healing mage, "but it will be risky. We will have to move some of our forces forward, and that will harm our defense."

"Do it," replied StormSong. "If we don't kill him, the battle is lost."

LifeTender nodded and started sending orders through an air tunnel. A small group of Sakovans gathered in front of the chokas and began concentrating on the enemy between them and the officer. After a few minutes, a noticeable bulge in the enemy's lines appeared. The small group moved forward a few paces and continued their assault. They repeated this procedure several times until they started taking fire from enemy groups alongside them.

"Now," HawkShadow said to his partners.

The four chokas raced forward into the enemy's bulge. HawkShadow led the way with the other three following in his wake. The assassin swung his blade from side to side as he sliced his way towards the officer. The choka's sharp fore claws and beak tore into the Motangans who failed to yield to the attacking Sakovans

Goral urged Bertha forward until he was right behind HawkShadow. His long maul reached out to smash Motangans that were beyond HawkShadow's reach. When the group reached the edge of the rise, StormSong and SunChaser moved off center to clear the Motangans away from the face of the cliff. The Sakovan archers on the ridge above the charging chokas saw what was happening. They directed their fire into the enemy around the chokas.

HawkShadow locked eyes for a moment with the officer who had been watching the charge. There was hatred evident in the man's face, but there was also fear as he watched the Sakovans coming for him. He began to back away, pushing soldiers between the chokas and himself. Suddenly, SunChaser fell from her choka, an arrow lodged in her back. StormSong turned and saw some of the Motangans turning away from the front lines and pursuing the chokas.

"We have followers," shouted StormSong. "SunChaser is down."

Moments later, StormSong's choka took an arrow to its neck. The warbird stumbled and fell, throwing StormSong to the ground. Her sword skittered away from her as she rolled into the base of the cliff, the wind knocked out of her lungs. HawkShadow slowed and let Goral pass him. He sheathed his sword and reached for several Sakovan stars as Goral's maul continued clearing the way towards the officer. HawkShadow tossed one star at the officer, but a Motangan soldier unexpectedly stepped into its path. HawkShadow fisted another star, his eyes scanning the movements of the soldiers around the retreating

officer. He waited patiently for an opening as Goral and he charged forward.

HawkShadow saw his chance and let his Sakovan star fly. The whirling metal disc with sharp teeth slammed into the back of the officer's head. The officer stumbled forward and clung onto a Motangan soldier for a few seconds before falling to the ground.

"Retreat!" HawkShadow shouted to Goral. "Pull back now!"

Goral slowed his choka and turned it around. He shook his head as the Motangans continued to run towards him when they should be charging away from him. He grinned broadly when he realized that many of them had heard HawkShadow's call to retreat. The Motangans did not charge at the maul-wielding giant, but rather pushed the soldiers alongside them in an attempt to get out of his way. He urged Bertha onward and caught up to HawkShadow. Together they fought their way through the enemy soldiers towards the area where StormSong fell from her choka.

Chapter 17

Sudamar

“They certainly do not appear to be fearing an attack,” observed Galantor “The sentries are not alert, and there are far too few of them to be effective.”

“At least the ones that we can see,” replied Princess Alastasia. “I will not underestimate their defenses. According to the information we got from the Torak, Sudamar has three thousand soldiers defending it. I wish we knew how long the sentries have been here. I do not want to take them out only to discover that it is time for a shift change.”

“They have not eaten yet,” smiled Galantor. “Look closely. Each sentry has a food sack with him, and the sacks are not empty.”

“Good observation,” nodded Princess Alastasia. “That makes the decision easy. Send our teams out. I want all of the sentries eliminated around the same time.”

Galantor slid into the darkness and passed the princess’s commands to the advance teams. He returned quickly and informed the princess that the teams were on their way. They watched the sentries in silence for a few moments as the elven assassin teams got into position.

“What is your plan of attack?” asked Galantor.

“The first step is to get some of our archers high over the city,” answered the princess, “particularly near the city center where the barracks are. I want archers on every rooftop that can be accessed without awakening the city.”

“And then we surround the barracks compound?” asked Galantor.

“Exactly,” nodded Alastasia. “I assume that there will be soldiers not in the barracks as well, so once we surround the barracks, I want teams at every major intersection. I want Sudamar taken with a minimum of bloodshed.”

“You plan to take the Motangan soldiers hostage?” frowned Galantor. “That is rather risky. It would be safer to kill them all. Why take such a risk?”

“I do not mean for our archers to hold their fire,” explained Princess Alastasia, “but there is no need to annihilate the Motangans either. If we get into a prolonged battle here in Sudamar, word will spread that the elven invasion is underway. That will increase our losses elsewhere on the island. Our goal is to conquer the Island of

Darkness quickly, and that requires stealth. Besides, I think that many of the Motangans might be glad to no longer be controlled by a dictator who thinks only of himself."

"You think there is hope of rehabilitating the Motangan soldiers?" questioned Galantor.

"I do," nodded Princess Alastasia. "History tells us of at least one other time that the Motangans rebelled against Vand. That last rebellion resulted in the invasion of the mainland. Truthfully, I do not know the disposition of the average Motangan soldier, but we are about to find out. As soon as the sentries are neutralized, I want our forces to enter the city quietly. We will try to attain the high ground by controlling the rooftops and then we will surround the barracks and control the major intersections. Those are the instructions that I want given to the troops."

"Then that is what I shall pass along," replied Galantor as he turned to leave.

"There is more," Princess Alastasia said before the elven officer could leave. "I want a dozen mages to come with me. I also want a dozen of the best warriors to accompany me."

"To protect you," nodded Galantor.

"No," Alastasia shook her head. "I want to neutralize the Motangan mages before they can get word out of the attack."

"Do you know where they are?" frowned the officer.

"No," the princess admitted, "but I have a good idea of where I will find them. The Motangan mages are the elite of Vand's society. They will be housed in the finest building in Sudamar."

"The temple?" questioned Galantor.

"The temple," nodded the princess. "I will enter it as soon as you have the barracks surrounded. Make sure that no alert is given before that time."

Galantor nodded and faded into the darkness. Princess Alastasia stared at the closest sentries to see if she would be able to detect the elven assassination teams. She grinned broadly when both of the closest sentries suddenly slumped and fell noiselessly to the ground. She turned and headed towards her army to gather her mages and warriors.

When Princess Alastasia reached the departure point, she was pleased to see that most of the elven warriors had already been dispatched. She saw a small group of mages and warriors standing around Galantor. She strode purposefully towards the group.

"Why am I not surprised to see you among this group, Galantor?" asked the princess.

"I am only following your commands," grinned the elven warrior. "You asked for the best."

“That I did,” smiled Alastasia. “Let’s go.”

The small group of elves moved swiftly towards the city of Sudamar. Princess Alastasia started when she saw the Motangan sentries still on duty, but she quickly recognized them as elven imposters and grinned.

“Nice touch,” she said softly to Galantor.

“I thought you would approve,” he replied.

The group passed the sentries and entered the Motangan city. Dark shadows flitted far in the distance as the elves secured the sleeping city. The princess’s eyes rose as they moved towards the city center. She scanned the rooftops and saw no one.

“They are there,” Galantor softly assured the princess when he saw her eyes searching the rooftops. “You are not supposed to see them.”

The princess did not respond, but her eyes returned to street level as the temple came into view. She moved past Galantor and took the lead, turning at the next intersection to avoid approaching the front of the temple directly. She knew there would be more sentries at the entrances to the temple.

The small group passed through a cordon of elven archers that were surrounding the barracks and eventually halted on a street that approached the side of the temple. Princess Alastasia held up her hand in a silent order to forestall anyone following her. She moved cautiously along the street until she came to the last intersection before the temple. She hugged the building on the corner as she peered out at the small replica of the temple in Vandamar. While Vand’s temple in Vandamar rose over a dozen stories, the smaller temple in Sudamar was only four stories high. Like the temple in Vandamar, this one had only two entrances, one in the front, and one in the rear.

Princess Alastasia could just see the profile of one of the front guards from her concealed position. The rear guards were not visible at all. The princess dashed across the open area separating the blocks of city buildings from the temple. She hugged the wall of the temple and waited silently to see if an alarm would be sounded. The city remained silent.

The elven princess studied the ground at her feet and found a small scraggly vine trying desperately to climb the side of the temple. She concentrated on it and cast her magical spell. The vine shot upward as its tiny feet lashed out and attached to the wall of the temple. The princess continued to concentrate even after the vine had reached the roof of the temple. The vine responded by growing thicker and sturdier. When she was satisfied that the vine would hold the weight of the elves, she wove an air tunnel to the rest of her small

group.

"Come across the open area one at a time," instructed the princess. "Check the guard at the front of the temple before exposing yourself. I will wait for you on the roof."

Princess Alastasia dropped the air tunnel and climbed the vine to the roof of the temple. From her new vantage point, Alastasia was able to gaze over the rooftops of the city. Still the elven archers were hard to spot. She dismissed them from her mind as she turned and dashed to the rooftop entrance to the temple. She stood to one side of the doorway and listened intently. She heard nothing. A few minutes later her small group reassembled on the roof.

"We will take one floor at a time," explained the princess. "Move swiftly, but silently. I would like to eliminate the mages before the battle begins."

Everyone in the group nodded their understanding, and Princess Alastasia led the group into the temple. Inside the temple, the group split up into thirteen groups with one warrior accompanying each mage. Galantor grouped with the princess.

There were less than thirteen rooms on the top floor, so Galantor and the princess waited near the top of the stairs for the others to finish their task. Alastasia listened intently for any sound that might alarm the rest of the inhabitants of the temple, but none came. When everyone was reassembled, the princess led the way down the stairs.

Alastasia and Galantor entered the first room near the stairs. They moved silently into the darkness. Two figures rested upon the beds in the room. Princess Alastasia cast freeze balls on each of them. Galantor used his sword to decapitate the frozen mages, and the elven duo left the room. Before they could find another occupied room, the rest of the elven group reassembled. The princess led them down the stairs to the second level.

Again the elves split up in pairs and raided each of the rooms without causing alarm. Although the assassinations were quick, Alastasia knew that time was running out. If she wished to avoid a bloodbath in the Motangan city, she had to move quickly. As she led the group down the stairs to the first level, a soldier happened by. Movement from the stairs caught his attention and he turned to look. His mouth opened to shout an alarm, but Alastasia's Sakovan star impacted his forehead before he could speak. Galantor pushed past the princess and rushed to the fallen soldier to finish him off, but the Motangan was already dead. He pulled the star from the dead man's forehead and stared questioningly at it.

"It is a Sakovan star," the princess said as she moved passed Galantor.

Galantor wiped the blade of the star on the Motangan's uniform

and stuck it in his pouch. He hurried after the princess and the others. Alastasia halted the group in the large atrium.

"Split up and check for anyone on this level," instructed the princess. "Two of you handle the guards at the rear door. Galantor and I will take the guards out front."

The elves silently moved on to eliminate the enemy inside the temple. Princess Alastasia led Galantor towards the front door. She halted just inside it.

"Do not kill these two unless it cannot be avoided," the princess said softly. "I want one of them as a messenger."

Galantor nodded as Alastasia waved him into a dark corner. She moved cautiously to the door and opened it just a crack. Then she backed into the darkness alongside the elven warrior. One of the guards on the other side of the door stuck his head in and looked around.

"I don't see anything," he said softly to his partner before withdrawing to the outside and closing the door.

"Try again," urged Galantor as he understood what the princess was trying to do.

Alastasia nodded and moved out of the dark corner. Once again she opened the door a crack and quickly hid. This time the door opened abruptly, and a Motangan soldier entered the temple. His eyes scanned the darkness, but he saw nothing. As soon as the soldier moved away from the doorway, Alastasia hit him with a freeze ball. The frozen soldier stood staring, his mouth partially opened in confusion. The soft voice of the other guard could be heard from outside the door. The princess waited patiently. A few moments later, the second guard entered the temple in search of his partner. The princess cast a freeze ball and froze the second guard.

"Peek outside and make sure that these two have not been missed," Alastasia commanded Galantor as she walked towards the two frozen Motangans.

When Galantor returned, the princess chose one of the guards and placed her hands near the man's ears. She cast a warming spell and allowed the heat to penetrate the ice so that the man could hear well.

"You have a chance to live," Princess Alastasia said softly as she moved her hands over the man's eyes and caused the ice to melt. "To earn your life, you must deliver a message for me. If you do not obey me, Galantor will ensure your slow and painful death. If you understand me, blink your eyes twice."

The Motangan blinked his eyes, and the princess continued.

"I want you to carry a message to the soldiers in the barracks," stated the princess. "Will you cooperate without foolishly trying to raise an alarm?"

The man blinked again. Alastasia warmed the man's head so that he was free to speak. She stood poised to strike out at him if he shouted, but the man merely breathed deeply.

"You are wise," commented the princess. "The elves have taken over this city. Right now we have the barracks completely surrounded and are quite capable of killing every soldier in the city. I would prefer not to deal with such bloodshed. I want you to enter the barracks and seek out the highest-ranking officer. Explain the situation to him. Tell him that we will accept the peaceful surrender of Sudamar. Will you do that?"

"Will you slaughter them when they come out of the barracks?" asked the soldier.

"I will not," assured the princess. "If that was my goal, I would merely ignite the barracks with the men still inside. I am trying not to kill your people, if that is possible. Will you carry the message?"

"I will carry it," the man said after a slight hesitation. "I cannot guarantee what the reply will be."

"Understood," nodded the princess as she cast a spell that removed the effects of the freeze ball.

Galantor immediately reached out and grabbed the Motangan's sword from its sheath. The guard held his hands up submissively as the rest of the elven party started to gather around. The guard stared at the elves in disbelief.

"How did everyone get into this temple?' he asked.

"Go now," ordered Princess Alastasia as she ignored his question. "Do your best to save your fellow soldiers."

The man nodded and moved hesitantly towards the door. Galantor moved with him, and the Motangan realized that he would be escorted to the barracks. The guard looked around warily as he emerged from the temple, but he saw nothing out of the ordinary in the city. He was beginning to doubt the princess's words as he approached the barracks compound until an elven soldier stepped out of the darkness and stood in his path.

"What is this, Galantor?" asked the soldier. "You were supposed to send a signal to start the attack, not bring a captive to us."

"Princess Alastasia is offering to accept the humans' surrender," replied Galantor. "This man is the messenger to deliver the offer. He will be allowed to enter the barracks. Your men will also allow the humans to exit the barracks if they come out without weapons."

The Motangan heard murmurs of disapproval from all around him. He turned his head to look for the elven soldiers, but he could not see them.

"And if they come out of the barracks with weapons?' asked the elven soldier.

“Then kill them,” shrugged Galantor. “Let this man pass.”

The elven soldier stepped aside, his eyes glaring at the Motangan. The temple guard moved slowly past the soldier, expecting to be struck down at any moment, but no blow came his way. He threaded his way through the maze of barracks until he came to the one that he knew the officer inhabited. He opened the door without knocking and stepped into the darkness. He walked halfway along the corridor between the bunks before someone grabbed him from behind.

“What are you doing sneaking into this building?” snarled the soldier who had captured the guard.

Two torches immediately blazed to life as soldiers jumped from their bunks and crowded around the intruder.

“A thief most likely,” accused one of the soldiers. “We should decorate the rafters with him.”

“He should have chosen a different barracks,” scowled another soldier. “Only a fool would enter this one and expect to get away with it.”

The guard stood speechless, shaking his head vigorously. Before he could explain that he was just a messenger, the officer approached and pushed his way through the crowd. He stood tall before the captured man and glared at him.

“What is the meaning of this intrusion?” asked the officer.

“I carry a message,” the guard said haltingly. “I think you should hear it in private.”

“A message?” puzzled the officer. “From whom?”

“Can we speak in private?” asked the guard nervously.

“Answer me,” snapped the officer. “Who is the message from?”

“From the elves,” the guard swallowed hard. “The barracks are surrounded by elves. They sent me in to ask for your surrender.”

Some of the soldiers started laughing, while others shouted that the intruder was a liar. Some of the soldiers started towards the door, swords in their hands.

“Stop!” barked the officer. “Everyone be quiet.”

When the room fell into silence, the officer stepped close to the guard and spoke softly, but harshly.

“You will explain yourself,” ordered the officer.

“I was on guard duty tonight at the front door of the temple,” the guard nodded vigorously. “My partner and I were tricked into entering the temple by a constantly opening door. When we did enter, an elven mage froze us. She told me that I could live if I delivered a message to the officer in charge in the barracks. I agreed. If I had not agreed, they would have killed me.”

“Continue,” the officer said loudly to halt the chatter that his men had started up after hearing about the attack on the temple.

“She said that she did not want to kill all of the soldiers in the barracks if she didn’t have to,” continued the guard. “She is offering to accept your surrender and let your men live if they will leave the barracks without their weapons.”

“And if they leave with their weapons?” asked the officer.

“They will be killed,” answered the guard.

“Did you see the supposed army of elves around the barracks?” asked the officer.

“I did not,” the guard answered truthfully, “but I did hear them. They were not keen on the idea of allowing us to surrender, but I believe that they will do so.”

“Are you really expecting me to believe that a bunch of escapees are demanding our surrender?” the officer shook his head. “You will be hanged for deserting your post.”

The officer pointed to two men and motioned towards the door. The two chosen soldiers grinned and nodded as they hurriedly dressed. They picked up their swords and moved to the door.

“I do not think that they are escapees,” the guard offered sheepishly. “They certainly weren’t dressed properly for slaves.”

The two Motangan soldiers quickly opened the door and barged outside. The first soldier out the door was instantly skewered by an elven arrow and fell to the ground. An elven arrow also struck the second soldier, but his body fell back through the doorway. Other soldiers dragged his body completely into the building and slammed the door shut.

“What do you mean about their dress?” the officer asked the guard. “If they are not escapees, then who are they?”

“One of them was referred to as the princess,” offered the guard. “I think they are from Elvangar.”

“Preposterous,” laughed one of the soldiers, earning him a dark glare from the officer.

“We need time to figure a way out of this,” the officer muttered to himself. “If we can get word to our mages, they can call for troops from one of the other cities.”

“I don’t think there are any mages to call upon,” frowned the guard. “I am not sure how they did it, but there were over two dozen elves already inside the temple. If the mages were still alive, we should have heard from them by now. They also said that if you didn’t surrender, they would burn down the barracks with the men still inside.”

“What else haven’t you told me?” snapped the officer.

“I would rather die with a sword in my hand than be burned alive in here,” shouted one of the soldiers.

Other soldiers shouted in agreement, and the officer yelled for

silence. His mind worked feverishly to figure a way out of his dilemma, but he could not think of one. Finally, he pointed to a soldier near the door.

"I want you to walk outside without your sword," ordered the officer. "Let's see if these elves are true to their words. Look around and see if you can determine the number of elves that are out there."

The chosen soldier hesitated, but those around him helped him by opening the door and shoving him out. No arrows streaked into his flesh as he gazed around in the dim light. He could not see any elves, but he saw the body of the other soldier on the ground, an arrow piercing his skull. One of the elves must have figured out what was going on, because suddenly a distant voice barked and the elves stepped out of the shadows. The Motangan's jaw dropped as he slowly turned and gazed at the ring of elven archers surrounding the barracks compound. The soldier's hands instinctively rose upward to show that he held no weapon. A moment later, the elves disappeared into the darkness. The soldier turned and entered the building and closed the door.

"Well?" prompted the officer.

"We are surrounded," the soldier reported nervously, "and the elves I saw did not look like escaped slaves. Motanga has been invaded."

"And they didn't shoot at you?" asked the officer.

"Not at all," replied the soldier. "At first I could not see any elves at all, but their officer barked a command, and they stepped out of the darkness to show themselves. They are clearly confident of their position."

"How many are there?" asked the officer.

"I can only guess," answered the soldier, "but there are certainly more than a thousand."

"Which means that we would never survive the battle," frowned the officer. "Even if I could get word to the other barracks, the elves have the darkness on their side."

"Plus their intention to burn us alive," interjected one of the soldiers. "I don't think we have any choice."

The officer whirled and glared at the soldier for a moment, but he did not discipline the man. Instead he sighed heavily and nodded.

"Get dressed," the officer commanded his troops. "We will march out of here with dignity. You are to leave all of your weapons on your bunk, including knives. I will not give the elves any excuse for going back on their word."

The soldiers talked softly as they got dressed. They often looked over at the officer expecting a rebuke, but the officer scolded no one. He turned to the temple guard and spoke softly.

“Go outside and tell the elves that I am bringing my men out unarmed,” instructed the officer. “When I am sure that their word can be trusted, I will go from barracks to barracks and bring out all of the men. If this is not acceptable to them, come back and tell me.”

The guard started to object, but the officer physically turned the guard around and shoved him towards the door.

Chapter 18

Thunder in the Woods

Dark shadows flitted in the dim light as the elves stealthily entered the city of Teramar. Princess Alahara gazed skyward to approximate the time and nodded in approval.

"If everything is going this smoothly at Sudamar and Eldamar," Tamar said softly, "all three cities will be taken without anyone else on the island knowing about it."

"That is the goal," Princess Alahara responded, "but let's not get overly confident. It only takes one mage to get the word of this invasion to Vandamar."

Calitora had been following the elven princess and had heard the short conversation. He nodded approvingly at Alahara's caution as he turned away from the elves and sought shadows of his own. The Chula shaman moved on an erratic path through the sleeping city. His task was to find any stray Motangan soldiers and eliminate them. He moved swiftly, but silently through the alleyways of the city, looking for any late night pedestrians.

Calitora knew the elven plan of attack well, and he was not distracted by moving shadows far above him. He knew that elven archers would control the rooftops. Instead he focused on the streets and alleyways, his eyes scanning into the darkness looking for any signs of movement.

A large alley cat darted out of a dark corner, frightened by the human presence. Calitora smiled sympathetically as the cat dashed into another alley. The shaman zigzagged through the city, constantly closing in on the city's center where the elves were climbing to the roof of the temple. He halted briefly outside a window when he heard a noise, but he moved on again when he determined that it was merely the sounds of a fitful sleeper.

Eventually he reached the area of the city that allowed him an unobstructed view of the front of the temple. Hidden in the shadows, Calitora peered out at the two sentries standing guard outside the front doors of the temple. The Motangans were relaxed, almost lethargic in their boring duty. Calitora was about to move onward, swinging wide around the temple in his continuing search for stray soldiers, when something caught his attention. His eyes were drawn upward to a small balcony on the second level of the temple. The balcony was on the side of the temple, and Calitora did not have a

good view of it, but he was sure that he had detected movement there.

The Chula shaman swiftly backed away from the front of the temple and raced to a position where he could better observe the balcony. Hoping that the figure had been one of the elven attackers, Calitora maintained his stealth for fear of alarming the enemy. When he approached the temple from a different angle, the shaman could clearly see the black shape on the balcony. His heart raced as he saw the Motangan mage. The Motangan's lips were moving, and Calitora knew that the secrecy of the invasion was lost. Somehow a mage had escaped Princess Alahara's assassination squads, yet no alarm had been sounded. Calitora glanced back at the sentries in front of the temple and saw no cause for alarm. The Motangan mage was trying to hide from the assassins and still get a message off to Vandamar.

The Chula shaman could not attack the Motangan mage without alerting the sentries, at least not from his current position. There was a wide-open area between him and the temple. He could not cross the open area without being noticed. Making a spontaneous decision, Calitora transformed into a cat and raced towards the side of the temple. His mind worked feverously as he tried to figure out how he could transform into a human again and attack the mage without getting killed. The shaman knew he would be extremely vulnerable during, and immediately after, his transformation. That vulnerability could cost him his life.

The sentries at the front of the temple saw the cat racing across the open area. They noted it with disinterest, and Calitora made the safety of the side of the temple without incident. He continued running until he was directly under the balcony, the only safe place for him to transform. As Calitora was assuming a human shape, he heard a shout from above him. Having finished his report to Vandamar, the Motangan mage was shouting an alarm to rouse the soldiers of the city.

Berating himself for being too slow to act, Calitora leaped away from the side of the palace and sent a light blade streaking upward. He immediately followed the spell with another. The first light blade tore into the balcony holding the Motangan mage, shredding the supports of the balcony, and the building's appendage began to crumble and fall. The second blade of light ripped through the railing and shredded the Motangan mage. Calitora dove and rolled away as the wreckage tumbled to the ground.

As the Chula shaman rolled to his feet, he heard hundreds of voices shouting from the nearby barracks compound. He turned and saw the Motangan soldiers streaming out of the barracks, their voices raised in alarm. He watched dispassionately as the elven archers slaughtered the Motangan soldiers. Putting the carnage out of his

mind, Calitora raced to the front of the temple. Princess Alahara's forces had already killed the two sentries, and the princess stood on the front steps staring at the battle raging near the barracks. Calitora halted in front of the princess.

"Word has already gotten out about the invasion," Calitora reported. "There was a mage on the balcony of the temple. I am sure that he used an air tunnel before shouting an alarm. I could not silence him in time. I am sorry."

"Do not be hard on yourself, Calitora," the Princess Alahara smiled compassionately. "We noticed the empty bed during our search, but time was against us. I suspect that each city is supposed to have a mage available at all times to communicate with Vandamar. The loss is the Motangans'. Taking the city without unnecessary bloodshed would have been nice, but our goal is to conquer this island. We are doing that."

"Let's hope that King Avalar in Eldamar and Princess Alastasia in Sudamar were more successful than we were," interjected Tamar.

"We will know soon," replied the princess as she gazed upward at the night sky. "We are due to talk soon."

"How can you do that?" frowned the shaman. "The air tunnel requires knowledge of a place before it can be used."

"Not always," smiled Princess Alahara. "Within the hour, we will communicate from the roofs of the three temples and make our plans for moving northward. Each of us will weave an air tunnel to Elvangar. Mages there will connect the three air tunnels and allow us to talk."

"What trouble will the sounding of the alarm cause us?" asked Tamar.

"I am not sure," frowned the princess. "The three southern cities only host three thousand men each. Vandamar is much more fortified. There are over thirty thousand Motangan soldiers in Vandamar, and the element of surprise will not be on our side. A great many elves may die to liberate this island."

"Perhaps we should wait for the rest of our armies to arrive?" suggested Tamar. "Our ships should be returning home by now."

"Those armies are bound elsewhere," Princess Alahara shook her head. "It is up to us to free our people from this bondage."

"They have ten times our numbers," frowned Tamar. "While I would willingly pit elven archers against any foe, do not expect miracles from them."

"I do expect miracles," Princess Alahara smiled tautly, "and you will learn to believe in them, too. Let's go to the roof of the temple and prepare to find out how the others have done."

* * *

Lightning flashed incessantly across the sky, illuminating the huge voluminous clouds that were producing the torrent of rain pelting down on the Sakovan heartland. Great claps of thunder roared continuously, masking out all other sounds in the Motangan encampment. HawkShadow knelt not far from the sentries guarding the perimeter of the encampment. His hair was soaked and matted to his head. His clothes were as wet as if he were kneeling in a stream, but he ignored it all. He remained motionless, an arrow nocked, his eyes focused on an unseen sentry, waiting for the lightning to illuminate him once again.

The Sakovan assassin did not have long to wait. A brilliant flash of lightning crackled overhead, bringing the brilliance of daylight into the dark of night. The flash only lasted for a second and then was gone, the blackness returning to rule the night, but HawkShadow closed his eyes, the image of the briefly illuminated sentry burned into his retinas. He raised his bow and fired at the false image. He tried to listen for the scream of his enemy, but the thunder made that impossible. The assassin knew that even the closest sentry to the victim would not hear the scream through nature's din. HawkShadow waited for the next flash of lightning to confirm his kill before moving further along the perimeter of the Motangan encampment.

After his sixth confirmed kill, the Sakovan assassin broke away from the perimeter and headed deeper into the woods. StarWind and Goral saw him coming and met him before he was far into the clearing.

"How did it go?" asked StarWind.

"As it should have," smiled HawkShadow. "All six are confirmed kills. Send in Goral's people."

"So we shall," nodded the Sakovan spymaster. "Where do you want my people? Should I stay and protect Goral's retreat?"

"Move onward," interjected Goral. "Let us not waste time tonight. This storm will not last forever."

"Goral is right," nodded HawkShadow. "This storm is perfect cover for what we intend to do. Move your people to the opposite side of the encampment. That is where I will take out the next six sentries. Goral, when you disengage, take your people halfway around to the right. I will hurry there when I am done with StarWind's sentries."

"We will be there," promised the Sakovan giant as he withdrew from the impromptu meeting.

Goral strode over to his waiting warriors, two-dozen Sakovan marauders hand-picked for the dangerous assignment. Goral nodded silently to his people who promptly mounted their chokas.

"Remember that this is only a raid," Goral cautioned softly. "Keep an eye on me at all times. When I start to disengage, abandon the

battle as soon as you can do so safely. I will linger near the perimeter to aid anyone caught in the thick of it. The rest of you continue into the forest. Understood?"

A chorus of nods and murmurs of agreement rippled through the warriors. Goral mounted Bertha and led the small group out of the clearing. They moved with little regard to noise as the chokas were fairly silent beasts, and thunder still rolled through the night air. As they approached the perimeter where HawkShadow had eliminated the sentries, Goral slowed and signaled his warriors to stop. The giant rode slowly forward until he could see the encampment during the lightning flashes. He smiled in appreciation of the assassin's skills. Pulling a huge maul from its holder, Goral raised the maul high overhead and pointed towards the encampment. His warriors pulled their weapons and nodded to their leader.

Goral nudged Bertha, and the large warbird raced towards the enemy. The giant looked briefly over his shoulder to make sure that his warriors were following and then concentrated on the Motangan encampment. He smiled briefly as he raced past the bodies of the sentries, but the distraction was only momentary. His eyes used the flashes of lightning to memorize the placement of the nearest Motangan tents. The encampment was devoid of pedestrians as the deluge continued to rain down out of the angry clouds.

Goral held the large maul out with one hand as he approached the first tent. He smashed the supports of the tent as he rode by, his eyes already fixed on a tent deeper in the encampment. He smashed the supports of two more tents while guiding Bertha towards his target, which was at the limit of the depth of the planned incursion. The choka unflinchingly used her sharp claws to tear through the fabric of the chosen tent. Momentarily out of the rain, Goral grinned broadly as he entered the tent occupied by eight Motangan soldiers. Bertha immediately tore into the flesh of a sleeping Motangan, bringing hysterical screams from her victim. The other soldiers awoke and tried to scramble to their feet, but Goral's maul was already in action.

Goral and Bertha worked as a finely honed team. While she tore into soldiers on one side of the tent, Goral's maul hammered away at those on the other side. Within seconds the tent was devoid of Motangan life. Goral urged Bertha through the torn fabric and immediately aimed for another tent. After the Sakovan giant and his warbird had destroyed three tents and their inhabitants, he heard an alarm shouted between claps of thunder. It was time to withdraw. He whistled loudly and headed towards the perimeter. Hesitating at the edge of the encampment, Goral counted his fleeing warriors. When the last of his people had passed by, Goral tapped Bertha into a gallop and

raced after his warriors. He heard the sounds of bowstrings snapping during the lull between thunderclaps, but nothing came close to him.

Goral passed his men, ordering them to follow him. They rode hard until they reached the area where HawkShadow would find them. Goral ordered his team to dismount and held a quick meeting to assess the damage to the enemy. Over six hundred Motangans had died in the brief fight, and not a single Sakovan had been injured. Goral grinned broadly and congratulated his warriors. He bowed his head in prayer and prayed that StarWind's team was having equal success on the other side of the Motangan encampment.

* * *

"The elves are attacking Teramar and Eldamar," Xavo said as he tried to catch his breath from running all the way to the beach from the temple.

"Escapees?" asked Lady Mystic.

"No," Xavo shook his head. "It is an invasion from Elvangar. "Estimates from both cities put the elves at one thousand for each city."

"But the garrisons in each of those cities are at least three thousand strong," frowned Lady Mystic. "The elves will be slaughtered."

"That is not what is being reported," Xavo shook his head. "It sounds as if Teramar and Eldamar have already fallen. The attack caught the Motangans sleeping in the barracks. The elves also managed to get into the temple undetected. In each case only the lone surviving mage sent the message."

"What about Sudamar?" asked Lady Mystic. "Is that also under attack?"

"We don't know," replied Xavo. "There was no answer when the mages tried to reach Sudamar. The generals suspect that it might have also fallen. They are in a panic. They expect an attack here in Vandamar at any moment."

"Bah," snorted Lady Mystic. "There are thirty thousand troops in this city. Three thousand elves will not attempt such a thing."

"The generals think a much larger force is heading this way," replied Xavo. "They have sent out scout ships towards Elvangar with mages aboard."

"They know where Elvangar is?" frowned Lady Mystic. "Why was I not informed?"

"They don't actually know where it is," replied Xavo, "but it is known to be to the east. That is why the southeastern city is named Eldamar. It was the port nearest the elves."

"What should we do?" worried Lady Mystic. "We shouldn't let the elves stumble into a trap. They probably have no idea how many

soldiers are here in Vandamar."

"I thought we should tell Emperor Marak what we know," shrugged Xavo. "I am no battle-hardened general, but I am willing to do whatever I can to help the elves, although I doubt that I can make much of a difference."

"You underestimate yourself," grinned Lady Mystic. "As Vand's disciple, you are the most senior person left in Vandamar. You can override the generals' plans and cause great havoc."

"I may technically be the most senior person here," frowned Xavo, "but that is not what Vand meant to have happen. I was supposed to go with him to Fakara. I doubt that the generals will listen to me. Vand has probably already told them that I am not to be trusted once he realized that I missed the boat."

"I doubt that Vand even knows that you have missed the boat," mused Lady Mystic. "He will not be holding court over there like he did here. He is in the land of his enemy. He will keep himself surrounded by only those he trusts dearly. Everyone else will have to go through Premer Tzargo to get a message to Vand."

"But the mages here would surely keep him informed of what is happening in Vandamar," countered Xavo. "If he hears my name, he will be incensed."

"No doubt he would be," nodded Vand's daughter. "Well, we must make sure that no word gets to him then."

"Impossible," retorted Xavo. "There must be a thousand mages still in Vandamar. Any one of them is capable of sending a message to Vand."

"Then we must eliminate a thousand mages," shrugged Lady Mystic, "and we must do it quickly."

Xavo's jaw dropped as he stared at Lady Mystic. For several long moments he stared as if he thought his lover had gone insane.

"You can't be serious," he finally said. "Such a plan is suicidal, even if it was possible. I am willing to give my life to help my daughter and her people, but I will not give yours."

"I have no wish to remain behind when you leave this world," Lady Mystic replied with a smile. "While I have not learned to appreciate your daughter's people as you have, I know what evil my father is. I will do anything to stop him."

"But a thousand mages?" balked Xavo. "It is impossible. Even our combined talents will not be enough to overwhelm such a group. There are many talented mages left in the city. Some of them even approach our skills. It is just impossible."

"So it would seem," shrugged Lady Mystic, "but it must be done. Not only that, but we must then deal with the generals. If we fail, the elves will surely perish. Are you willing to allow that to happen?"

“No,” Xavo sighed heavily. “This madness must be stopped. I will contact the Torak and see what he can suggest.”

“You trust Marak, don’t you?” asked Lady Mystic.

“Very much so,” nodded Xavo. “He is a clever man, and one can tell that his heart is in the right place. He showed me what a fool I was after my wife died, and he has impressed me ever since.”

“Then contact him immediately,” advised Lady Mystic. “We do not have time to waste.”

Xavo nodded and wove an air tunnel to Khadoratung.

* * *

The large room at the rear of the temple was filled with black cloaks. Some of the Motangan mages looked perplexed; others were merely curious. A few hosted skeptical glares as Xavo entered the large room and called for quiet. Vand’s disciple let his eyes rove over the assembled crowd without a hint of the nervousness that he held inside himself.

“I have had a coded communique from Vandegar,” Xavo announced. “The situation here on Motanga is extremely serious, but there is worse news. The enemy has found a way to intercept our messages when we use air tunnels. Even worse, the enemy has been forging messages and sending them to Vand. The messages appear to originate from here, but they always contain information meant to deceive our people. The Emperor has commanded that we temporarily halt the use of air tunnels to him so that he can discover who is trying to deceive him. He will only accept messages from one of two people, and those messages will be encoded.”

“What two people?” scowled one of the senior mages.

“Myself,” answered Xavo, “and Vand’s daughter, Lady Mystic.”

“I thought Lady Mystic was rebuked?” retorted the senior mage.

“You are correct,” nodded Xavo, “but Vand has changed his mind. Do you wish to argue with him?”

The senior mage frowned, but he did not speak. Xavo continued with his speech.

“It is believed that the elves utilized false air tunnel messages to take over the three southern cities,” declared Xavo. “Vand also believes that a huge army of elves is currently heading towards Vandamar.”

“We will be ready for them,” shouted a mage in the back of the room. “With thirty thousand soldiers and a thousand mages, we could conquer Elvangar, wherever it is.”

“A bold statement,” frowned Xavo, “but the elves are not interested in defeating our armies.”

“What do you mean?” questioned the senior mage. “Why else would they attack Motanga?”

“To kill you,” Xavo answered as he stared at the questioning mage. “The reports coming out of the southern cities indicate that the targets of the elves were the mages housed in the temples. I suspect that that will be true in Vandamar as well. They will avoid our thirty thousand men if they can, but they want to annihilate every mage in Motanga. Our knowledge of air tunnels is the gravest threat to their existence. They will sacrifice whatever they must to see us all dead.”

“Let them try,” sneered one of the mages. “They will be sorry to have misjudged us.”

“Indeed they will be sorry,” Xavo grinned as his eyes passed over the mages. “Vand has developed a plan to crush the elves completely. It requires your immediate action and without delay.”

“What is this plan?” asked one of the black cloaks.

“All of you are to board a ship within the hour,” explained Xavo. “Take nothing with you. The temple is to appear as if you are still in residence.”

“You want the elves to attack the temple thinking that we are still inside it?” asked one of the mages.

“Exactly,” nodded Xavo. “Once the elves commit themselves to the attack, you will be brought to land to attack them from behind. You,” Xavo said authoritatively as he pointed at the senior mage who had been asking all of the questions, “are to organize the elements of the attack. I would suggest five groups of two hundred mages each, but the choice will be yours.”

The chosen mage swelled with pride and immediately lost his skeptical glower. “Do we expect the elves to attack by sea or by land?” he asked.

“While we cannot be sure,” Xavo smiled inwardly, “I suspect that it will be a combination of the two. I think their land forces will be meant to distract and engage our military forces while the bulk of the attackers arrive by the sea. Your ship will be around the western edge of the jungle. They should not be able to see it when they approach.”

“And how will we know when the time has come for us to attack?” asked the mage. “You have already ruled out the use of air tunnels.”

“Either Lady Mystic or I will go to the beach and signal the captain of your ship,” explained Xavo. “The two of us will be remaining on land to spy on the elven movements.”

The senior mage smiled and nodded. Xavo spent a few more minutes answering questions that were easily handled then he ordered the assembled mages to head immediately for the docks where a huge troop transport was waiting for them. It took an hour for the ship to load and sail out of the harbor.

“How did it go?” asked Lady Mystic when Xavo returned to their

secret cove.

"Much easier than I expected," smiled Xavo. "Now we have to deal with the generals. I hope Marak's plan works as well as he thinks it will."

Chapter 19

The Tasks of Mages

Xavo and Lady Mystic watched as the mage ship sailed out of the harbor and rounded the western point of land. Within minutes its lanterns were lost to sight as the ship sailed behind the jungle just west of the city.

"How long will it take?" Xavo asked softly.

"Providing they all have a drink of the water," shrugged Lady Mystic, "they will be asleep within the hour."

"It's risky," frowned Xavo. "Not all of them will drink at the same time. Some are sure to notice the others falling asleep. They will be alerted and search for the cause. Those mages are not stupid."

"I never suggested that they were stupid," smiled Lady Mystic, "but they are used to being pampered. I made sure that the captain took on fresh food for the voyage. I even suggested that he host a feast for the mages as they would soon be called into battle."

"How nice of you," Xavo replied dryly. "So now they will be well fed when they come storming back ashore."

"Hardly," chuckled Lady Mystic. "The food supplied to the captain was indeed food deserving of a royal banquet, even if it had been prepared with a bit too much salt."

Xavo stared at Lady Mystic with a puzzled expression, but his features softened as the impact of her statement registered. Within seconds his face bore a wide grin and he laughed.

"I imagine that they will all drink at the same time," he chuckled. "You are a devious one."

"As if you hadn't already known that," smiled Lady Mystic. "Let's go deal with the generals."

Xavo smiled and took the hand of Lady Mystic. Together they walked away from the docks and towards the temple. When they got within eyesight of the temple, Xavo let go of Lady Mystic's hand and fell back a few paces to let her approach the front temple guards on her own. As Lady Mystic purposely mounted the long stairs leading to the front door of the temple, the guards stiffened and moved to block her entrance to the temple.

"You are not allowed inside the temple," declared one of the guards.

Lady Mystic glared at the guards and her mouth slowly opened to speak. Xavo quickly halted alongside her and addressed the guards.

“Perhaps you have not been informed yet,” Xavo said loudly, “but Vand’s daughter is back in the good graces of the Emperor. For the continued good health of the temple’s security force, you had best make sure that word of this spreads quickly. I am afraid that even Vand’s disciple would be at a loss to discipline Vand’s daughter if she were to become enraged by your careless questioning of her rights.”

The guard’s face registered shock as he realized that his life was in danger. He quickly bowed low to Lady Mystic and offered his sincerest apologies. He remained bowed while his partner moved quickly to open the doors to the temple and hold them while the two dignitaries passed through. Xavo smiled as he realized that word of Lady Mystic’s return to prominence would spread through the temple faster than a raging fire.

The traitorous duo made their way to the temple’s library and sent a soldier to summon the first of the three generals. While they were waiting for the general, Xavo got a map of the island and spread it out on a large table. The map was an exquisite work of art that overflowed the table. Xavo stared at the detailed markings of terrain and elevation. He was so engrossed in studying the map that he almost missed the knock on the door. Fortunately, Lady Mystic went to the door and opened it. The general entered with a look of apprehension evident upon his face.

“Join me at the map, General,” Xavo said as he waved the general towards the table. “The Emperor has been updated regarding the elven invasion. He has sent very specific instructions in regards to the movements of the armies left here for the protection of Vandamar.”

“Movements?” questioned the general. “Our plan is to fortify the city and defend it.”

“That is your plan,” snapped Xavo, “but not the Emperor’s. Your army is to move out of the city within the hour.”

“Where to?” asked the general, clearly unhappy with the turn of events.

“Your army is to head south towards the center of the island,” answered Xavo as he tapped his finger on the map. “You will divide your army into five groups of two thousand men each. I have placed coins on each of the five places where your men will make camp.”

The general’s eyes grew large as he studied the map. His head shook noticeably from side to side as he looked at each coin and its location on the map.

“There must be some mistake,” balked the general. “Those positions are untenable.”

“You wish to dispute my father’s wisdom?” scowled Lady Mystic.

“Certainly not,” the general swallowed hard, “but it is my duty to make sure that the Emperor is acting with the best information

possible. Each of the chosen positions yields the high ground to a potential enemy and by dividing my forces I would further endanger them. If the elves are marching northward from the southern cities, they may strike any one of these positions and cost us two thousand good men. Further, my armies will be well outside the limits of being able to respond to an attack on Vandamar. Surely, there has been a mistake in the translation of the orders. I am sure that the other generals would agree with my assessment. I beg of you to ask for their advice."

"You are assuming that the elven armies will march north," Xavo responded, "but they will not. As for the safety of your men, that is the reason that your armies are being sent out of the city."

"I do not understand," admitted the general.

"That much is obvious," replied Xavo. "Your armies are being hidden, General. That is precisely why they are being split into smaller groups and being sent to low-lying valleys. When the elves arrive by ship, your armies will receive orders to move northward and flank the elves."

"Vand's spies discovered documents that have been delivered to the elves by one of the officers in Vandamar," interjected Lady Mystic. "Those documents lay out all of the standard defenses that would be erected during an invasion. It is imperative that your armies be absent from the city when the elves attack."

"Your men will be the saviors of Vandamar," nodded Xavo. "The elves will be smug about their knowledge of our defenses, but your men will surprise them."

"A spy in our ranks?" frowned the general. "That is unbelievable."

"To a loyal patriot like yourself," nodded Lady Mystic, "but the evidence is irrefutable."

"Which is exactly why your armies have been chosen to hide outside the city," interjected Xavo. "Vand has complete trust in you. You will not mention your destination to anyone until you are well away from the city, not even the other generals. I must stress this need for secrecy. Do you understand?"

"Completely," nodded the general. "The chosen locations make perfect sense for armies that are trying not to be noticed. They are well off the normal routes and their low elevation will keep them hidden from anyone passing by. One problem still bothers me, though. We have no mages detailed to us. How will our orders be communicated in time for us to flank the elves? We will not even be able to communicate between the five groups."

"That is precisely why your men must be stationed precisely where I have indicated," answered Xavo. "Lady Mystic and I are familiar with those places and we will personally send the orders to

each group. Obviously, if your men are not there, the orders will never be heard. You must ensure that you follow these directions precisely. You are the only hope we have of surviving this elven invasion."

"You can count on my men," the general assured Vand's disciple. "We will be out of the city within the hour."

The general saluted and left the library. Xavo sighed with relief after the general left.

"I must go out to the balcony and contact Marak," said Xavo. "He will get those locations sent to the elves. You send for the next general."

"Shouldn't we wait a while to let the first army get out of the city?" questioned Lady Mystic. "We don't want both armies tripping over each other as we send them to indefensible positions."

"Good point," nodded Xavo. "I hope the elves don't run out of arrows before they reach the city. What are we to do with the third ten thousand men? They will never believe the need to abandon the city."

"I don't know," admitted Lady Mystic. "I cannot think of anything that would make the last army leave the city. Perhaps the best that we can do is to make them believe that the attack is not coming after all."

Xavo brightened as he smiled at Lady Mystic with appreciation. "That might work," he smiled. "We can tell the last general that the other two armies have engaged the elves in the south and defeated them."

* * *

The light of dawn increased steadily as Xavo and Lady Mystic stood on the beach near the jungle trail. Their eyes scanned the horizon until they found the ship of mages.

"There it is," pointed Lady Mystic. "It is farther out than I had expected."

"It must be far enough offshore to prevent any of the mages from reaching land," replied Xavo. "Are you worried about the range?"

"Not at all," balked Lady Mystic. "If I can see it, I can hit it. What do you want me to do?"

"Waves would be nice," smiled Xavo. "Can you create havoc with the sea?"

"I could," frowned Lady Mystic, "but it would take considerable power and a great deal of time. How would waves help?"

"I plan to puncture the hull with light blades," answered Xavo, "but the holes will have to be above the waterline. The waves will cause the ship to sink."

"While I like your light blade spell," Lady Mystic shook her head, "it is best used on large groups of people. Why not merely cause the

ship to explode?"

Xavo looked at Vand's daughter questioningly. "The wood in the ship must be old," he frowned. "Surely the saps have been dried out by now. How will you cause the explosion?"

"The ship is brand new," corrected Lady Mystic. "It came out of the shipyard after the invasion had already been launched. Besides, you can expand the air captured inside the wood as well as the saps."

Xavo stood silently for a moment and then finally nodded. "I had never thought of that," he admitted. "You certainly do think differently than anyone I have ever known. I will take the liquids," he offered. "You expand the gasses."

"So it is a race then?" chuckled Lady Mystic. "I accept the challenge. I will start at the stern."

Xavo grinned and turned his attention to the bow of the ship. The two mages fell silent as they gathered the power and concentrated on the ship. Several long minutes passed without disturbance of any kind. The sky grew lighter, and a soft wind began to herald the rising of the sun.

Suddenly, the silence was shattered by distant sounds of explosions. The bow and stern of the mage ship exploded in a shower of wooden splinters, large clouds of mist appearing at both ends of the ship. Shouts of alarm immediately followed as the huge ship started sinking rapidly. Several people jumped from the sinking ship, but it went down so quickly that few of the mages ever made it to the deck before it slipped under the surface of the sea.

"We need to separate somewhat," cautioned Xavo. "No one must survive the sinking of the ship. Kill anyone trying to get to shore, but keep yourself hidden. If I see anyone trying to retaliate against you, I will focus on him. You do the same."

Lady Mystic nodded silently and moved along the beach to put some distance between Xavo and herself. Xavo moved in the opposite direction as his eyes scanned the surface of the sea looking for survivors.

* * *

The Star of Sakova walked through the wet encampment, rainwater still dripping from the canopy of the giant fargi trees. She knew that the sun had risen, but it was hardly noticeable in the Sakovan heartland. The tall fargi trees blocked much of the light, and a morning mist lingered from the storm that had passed through during the night. She made her way through the camp and headed for the large tent that sat prominently in the center of the encampment. Long before she reached the tent, deep creases marred her brow.

Hundreds of Sakovans were stretched out on the ground. Healing mages, too numerous to count, were threading their way through the

area, stopping to check on the condition of each of the wounded. Lyra's eyes began to dampen, and she willed the tears to cease. Many of the wounded wore the old uniforms of the Imperial Guard of Omunga, but there were native Sakovans there as well. She recognized all too many of the faces as she headed for the tent. LifeTender saw Lyra approaching, and she hurried to intercept her before the Star of Sakova could enter the tent.

"You don't want to go in there," cautioned LifeTender. "The worst cases are inside."

Lyra could hold back her tears no longer. She started crying as she turned and gazed at the hundreds of wounded lying outside the large tent. Her lips pressed tightly together as she shook her head and looked imploringly at LifeTender.

"I must enter," cried Lyra as she tried to regain some semblance of composure. "I am responsible for each and every one of them."

"You are responsible for defeating this attack on the Sakova," LifeTender said soothingly, "but you are not responsible for the wounds these people had inflicted upon them. We are all here voluntarily to save our homeland. You must not take this personally."

"I will enter," Lyra said stubbornly. "I must see how our people are suffering. I must let them know that their wounds will not be in vain."

"Let her enter," ValleyBreeze said as she emerged from the tent to see who was talking outside the flap. "It will mean a great deal to the wounded that the Star of Sakova cares for their sacrifice."

"Alright," nodded LifeTender, "but try to compose yourself, Lyra. We must not lead the wounded to despair."

Lyra nodded and wiped her eyes. She set her jaw rigidly and inhaled deeply to steady herself. ValleyBreeze held the flap open, and LifeTender escorted the Star of Sakova into the large tent. Lyra halted just inside the flap. She gazed at the neat rows of bodies laid out on the ground. She bit her lip as she saw men missing an arm or leg. Others had gaping rends in their flesh that were only visible because healing mages were changing the bandages at the time. She pictured similar gashes in those who were bandaged at the moment, and she fought back the tears. LifeTender took Lyra's hand and started leading her to the left. Valley Breeze moved deftly and blocked their path.

"Do not try to hide the truth from the Star," berated ValleyBreeze. "She will learn about StormSong soon enough, and she will not appreciate your attempts to shield her from reality."

"StormSong?" gasped Lyra. "What is wrong with her?"

LifeTender bit her lip, but she turned and led Lyra towards the right side of the tent. She did not attempt to answer the Star's question, but silently led her along the rows of bodies until they stood

at the feet of StormSong. Lyra looked down at the naked Sakovan warrior who had two healing mages kneeling alongside her. StormSong's body was raw and ripped in a hundred places. Dozens of deep puncture wounds dotted the warrior's flesh.

"It is a miracle that she is still alive," ValleyBreeze said softly. "She lost her choka and sword in the middle of the Motangan army. She must have fought with her bare hands."

"There was a pile of Motangan dead at her feet when HawkShadow and Goral found her," added LifeTender. "I do not understand why she is still alive. There is not enough energy left in her body to aid the healers. The wounds just won't close."

"She has never regained consciousness," interjected one of the healing mages beside StormSong. "There is little hope for her. Will you pray for her, Lyra? Pray that Kaltara will accept her as a martyr for her people?"

Lyra broke down and started crying. Tears flowed down Lyra's cheeks and dripped to the ground as the rain dripped down from the fargi trees outside the tent. LifeTender's face grew concerned as the nearby patients noticed the commotion, and the healing mage tried to lead Lyra out of the tent. Lyra ripped her hand from LifeTender's grasp and rushed to kneel beside StormSong. The two healing mages rose and backed off as ValleyBreeze shooed them away. LifeTender looked imploringly at ValleyBreeze, but ValleyBreeze merely shook her head in answer to the unspoken question.

Lyra reached out and took StormSong's hand in her own. She bowed her head in prayer, and her lips began moving silently. For several long minutes, the scene remained frozen, Lyra praying silently while LifeTender and ValleyBreeze looked on helplessly. Unexpectedly, ValleyBreeze reached out and grabbed LifeTender's arm. LifeTender looked questioningly at her fellow healing mage and then followed her gaze to StormSong's body. LifeTender's mouth fell open in surprise, and her eyes widened as she stared at the naked Sakovan.

A golden glow had grown almost imperceptibly around StormSong. The warrior's raw flesh began to pale from bright red to pink. Open wounds began to close, and the dark red rings around the punctures began to grow smaller. LifeTender and ValleyBreeze watched in astonishment as StormSong's body began to heal. Other healing mages were attracted by the now brilliant golden glow surrounding StormSong and Lyra. They began to gather around to witness the miracle.

Suddenly, StormSong's eyes popped open. She looked up at Lyra and saw the Star with her head bowed in prayer. A smile grew across the warrior's face, and she closed her eyes again. Lyra continued

praying, unaware that StormSong had awakened. The warrior's body continued to heal, the pink skin turning even paler to match StormSong's normal skin tone. The puncture wounds continued to grow smaller until they disappeared completely. A half hour after Lyra began praying, StormSong opened her eyes again and gently placed her free hand on Lyra's head. The Star of Sakova opened her eyes and stared at StormSong's face. Lyra smiled tautly, her tear-stained cheeks slowly giving way to a grin. She dropped StormSong's hand and leaned forward, bringing StormSong's body up so she could hug her. The embrace was long and silent, and finally the warrior broke it, her face clouded with concern.

"How is SunChaser?" StormSong asked softly.

"SunChaser?" echoed Lyra as she looked up at LifeTender questioningly.

"She was shot in the back with an arrow," replied the healing mage. "We dare not even remove it. We think it has punctured the heart."

"She is also unconscious," added ValleyBreeze. "There is little we can do for her."

"Take me to her," demanded Lyra as she rose unsteadily.

LifeTender rushed forward to help Lyra rise. The Star of Sakova wobbled with exhaustion, and ValleyBreeze moved swiftly to help LifeTender support the Star. Together they led Lyra across the tent to SunChaser. The Sakovan spy rested facedown on the ground, a Motangan arrow protruding from her naked back. Lyra shook off her escorts and fell to her knees beside SunChaser. She bowed her head in prayer to Kaltara.

* * *

Zatho approached the premer's tent in the center of the Motangan encampment. The sentries turned slightly away as he approached, but the Motangan mage stopped between them.

"How is the premer today?" he asked softly.

"He is in a foul mood," one of the sentries replied. "General Valatosa is with him, and you may enter, but I would advise waiting for another day. This one is not starting well."

The black cloak hesitated, but he finally shrugged and sighed heavily. "It is not about to get any better," he said to no one in particular.

The lone surviving mage of Premer Doralin's army moved the tent flap and entered. Doralin and Valatosa immediately looked up. Doralin waved the mage forward, and Zatho crossed the room and stood before the premer.

"I need more mages," declared Doralin. "I want you to contact Teramar immediately and arrange for the transport."

Zatho's mouth opened to speak, but the premer waved him to silence.

"I also want some food to accompany the mages," the premer continued. "I am not sure what those fools in Alamar are doing, but my army is starving."

"I cannot contact Teramar," Zatho reported when the premer stopped talking.

"I specifically stated that every mage in my command was to be taught the air tunnel spell," scowled Doralin. "If you don't know it, you are worthless to me."

"I know the spell," sighed Zatho. "I have tried contacting Teramar all morning. I am receiving no reply."

"Then try Vandamar," snapped the premer. "I must have more mages and more food, and I must have it immediately."

"I cannot contact Vandamar either," reported Zatho. "Nor can I contact Alamar or Duran. In fact, there is no one that I can contact with an air tunnel."

"What?" shouted Premer Doralin. "You claim to know the air tunnel spell, but you are incapable of contacting anyone? Explain yourself immediately."

"I cannot explain it," Zatho replied defensively. "I have contacted all of those places before, but no one is answering my call. I do not understand it."

"Could it be the storm?" interjected General Valatosa. "I have heard that unusual wind patterns can disrupt an air tunnel."

"I cannot say for sure," answered Zatho. "I have never had problems with the spell before, but it is not working now. I will continue to try contacting someone."

"Yes, you will," scowled the premer. "You will continue to try until you do contact someone. Leave me."

Zatho backed out of the tent while the premer glared at the man. General Valatosa watched with dismay.

"This invasion is not going as we expected," he said softly.

"You are a master of understatement," snapped the premer. "We have lost three quarters of our men since leaving Motanga. Those that are still alive are ready to bolt at any moment, and the nightly attacks by the Sakovans have our mighty warriors staying up all night in fear. We are slowly starving to death, and our lone mage has no idea how to practice his craft. And you say that all is not going as we planned?"

"We still have close to eighty thousand men," General Valatosa offered meekly. "We have inflicted heavy casualties on the Sakovans, and they have nowhere to run. All is not lost."

"Over two dozen soldiers were caught this morning trying to desert," replied Premer Doralin. "Tomorrow it may be hundreds. The

next day will be thousands. We cannot hold this army together long enough to exterminate the Sakovans if we do not get food. It is that simple."

"What are you suggesting?" frowned General Valatosa. "Are you thinking that we should abandon our mission?"

"I am seriously contemplating a pull back to Alamar," Doralin sighed heavily. "I do not look at it so much as a retreat, as I do a regrouping. The men need to eat and replenish their strength."

"But our orders are to pursue the enemy and annihilate them," Valatosa reminded the premer.

"I know our orders without your reminding," scowled the premer, "but I also know the capabilities of our armies. We cannot defeat the Sakovans without regaining our momentum, and the Sakovan raids are stealing that momentum from us. The battle at the ridge stole our energy. It wiped out our mages and brought fear into the hearts of our men. I would prefer to remain here and regroup if that is possible, but without fresh supplies I see no option other than returning to Alamar."

"We have ten thousand men in Alamar," nodded General Valatosa, "and ten thousand more in Duran. We could rotate those troops into the main army and let some of those in our ranks take a break from the fighting. Perhaps the idea of a regrouping does have merit."

"I am leaning that way," admitted the premer, "but I will give Zatho some more time to communicate with someone first. If food is soon to arrive, we will hold here. If not, we will return to Alamar."

"Let me send some men back to Alamar," suggested General Valatosa. "Perhaps they can find out what the delay is with the food deliveries. It cannot hurt anything, and it may speed the caravans towards us."

"Do it," nodded Premer Doralin. "Send a thousand men to Alamar. Give them permission to execute anyone in Alamar who is holding up the food shipments."

Chapter 20

Supply Lines

Princess Alahara led the elves single file through the narrow opening to a small cave. There was only room enough for a few elves inside the cave where she had hidden with her sister so long ago. She moved in the dark to the tunnel that led to a long chamber that ended up overlooking the mineshaft. Several dozen elves followed.

Princess Alahara had timed the visit to the mine perfectly. When she arrived at the ledge overlooking the shaft, the slaves were coming up in buckets, their long day of labor at its end. She gazed down at the kruls that were rotating a large wheel by walking in a circle and pushing spokes attached to the wheel. The turning wheel powered the buckets needed to haul the slaves up from the depths of the mine.

The princess gritted her teeth in rage as she watched the slave master wield his whip. The whip was not used on the kruls turning the wheel, but rather on the elven slaves who he deemed were not moving fast enough. She fought the compulsion to attack immediately, knowing that the other overseers would be the last to come to the surface. She did not want any Motangans to get away, and she did not want to have to go deep into the mine to capture them. There were other targets to attack before the day was done.

As the elven warriors gathered in the crawl space above the pit, Princess Alahara let her mind drift over the invasion plan, looking for any flaws that may cost elven lives. The three southern cities had been taken from the Motangans with little loss for the elves, but those cities required people to keep the conquered Motangans under control. While Avalar's army was heading north to attack the Motangan armies out of Vandamar, Alastasia's army was required to stay behind to govern the three cities. The elves were taking no chances of the Motangans regaining control over the ports.

Princess Alahara had been chosen to attack the far spread sites where elven slaves were held. As she freed the slaves, they were sent to the southern cities to relieve elven warriors. Those warriors were then sent out to hunt down kruls encamped in the forests of the southern half of the Island of Darkness. The mine where Eltor had been enslaved was among the last places to be attacked before Alahara and Alastasia regrouped their armies and joined with Avalar to march on Vandamar.

The sudden silence of the whip drew Princess Alahara out of her

musing. She peered over the edge and gazed down at the Motangans. The slaves had all passed into one of the corridors leading off the great chamber. The Motangan overseers were now coming up in the buckets. She knew that the kruls would soon be dismissed for the day.

"When the word is given to dismiss the kruls," Alahara ordered softly, "I want them all taken out immediately, before they leave this chamber. It is far safer than fighting them in the tunnels. Tamar, have men ready to rappel into the chamber. The enemy is fairly concentrated near this chamber at this time of day. It will save a great deal of time if we can kill most of them in the next few minutes."

Tamar nodded silently and started instructing his men as to what he wanted done. Within moments the elves were ready to attack. A dozen archers sat at the lip of the edge above the great chamber. Three other elves sat back from the edge; each of them had one end of a rope wrapped around his body. The rest of the elves stooped low, ready to toss the ropes over the edge and rapidly descend into the great chamber.

The slave master shouted, his whip cracking the air as the last overseer exited the bucket. The kruls instantly stopped pushing the wheel. Before the echo of the whip had died, a dozen arrows flew from the edge overlooking the room. Three ropes were tossed over the edge and elves raced to descend into the great chamber. Another round of arrows flew into the room, and shouts and screams filled the air.

Princess Alahara saw the kruls struck by the first round of arrows. The huge beasts howled in pain, several of them immediately falling into the abyss. The second round of arrows caught the last of the overseers who had not yet left the great chamber. The slave master had managed to survive the two rounds of arrows, as he was at the far end of the chamber, but he did not escape Alahara's compulsion spell. The large man's face contorted with confusion as his body moved towards the rim of the pit. Fear replaced the confusion, but he continued forward until his body toppled over the edge of the rim. His scream lasted for several long seconds before ending suddenly.

Princess Alahara followed the elven warriors down the rope. Distant sounds of shouting entered the great chamber from each of the tunnels leading off of it. Within moments, freed slaves, both elven and human, started pouring into the great chamber.

"Do not panic," Princess Alahara shouted to the elves and humans alike. "You are being freed by the forces of King Avalar of Elvangar. Gather at the entrance to the mine and get the gates open, but do not leave until you are told to."

The princess continued to direct the slaves as hundreds of them

flowed into the great chamber. The humans looked at the elven princess with confusion, but the elven slaves grinned and bowed slightly as they hurried past. They knew that their day of liberation had finally arrived.

* * *

King Avalar stood back from the edge of the rise watching his men divide into two groups. One group went to the east and the other to the west. Both groups walked silently in single file, and King Avalar decided to join the western group. He stepped into the line of warriors and followed the elf in front of him. The long silent walk eventually ended, and the elven warriors drew arrows from their quivers. Avalar gazed across the hidden canyon. He saw a long line of elves facing him on the opposite rim of the canyon. He had no fear of discovery as his men were far enough back from the edge to avoid detection. He waited patiently until that line of elves stopped moving.

When King Avalar was satisfied that his army was ready to attack, he raised his arm skyward. A thousand elven warriors nocked arrows and watched the king intently. When Avalar suddenly brought his arm down, the elves stepped forward to the edge of the rim and fired.

In the belly of the canyon were two thousand Motangan soldiers, prepositioned by Vand's disciple. The Motangans shouted with alarm as the elven arrows flew into their ranks, but there was little defense that they could offer. Another round of elven arrows flew into the Motangan army, and the soldiers began to run towards the mouth of the canyon, but none of them were allowed to exit the death trap. In mere minutes, the slaughter was over. Nothing moved on the floor of the canyon. King Avalar issued terse orders, and the line of elves moved into the canyon to make sure that no one had survived. When he was sure that the task was complete, King Avalar directed his army to the next hiding place of the Motangans.

* * *

StarWind and HawkShadow stood outside the great tent in the Sakovan encampment, concern clearly etched into their faces. Healing mages scurried around tending to the wounded outside the tent, but none of them entered the tent itself.

"I am worried about her," StarWind said softly. "There are no healing mages inside the tent to keep an eye on her. Healing takes a great deal out of the mage. How long can she keep this up?"

"Healing is something that I know little about," admitted the assassin. "I only know that the worst cases get to be inside the tent. Normally those outside the tent receive little attention from the mages as they must concentrate on the severally wounded."

"Well that is certainly not the case today," frowned StarWind. "Do not misinterpret my feelings. I am thrilled with what Lyra is

doing, especially with StormSong and SunChaser, but I fear that Lyra will reach the limit of her endurance. That is dangerous for a mage. It is possible for a mage to lose her magical ability by pushing it too far. There have even been cases where death has resulted from over exertion."

"Lyra will not lose her magical ability," interjected StormSong as she came up behind the couple.

StarWind whirled to stare at StormSong. Her face beamed with joy, and she smiled at her friend. StormSong looked as fit as she ever had.

"You look wonderful," smiled StarWind, "but your knowledge of magic is minimal. You are not a mage."

"No, I am not," replied StormSong, "but I am a Sakovan."

"What is that supposed to mean?" asked HawkShadow. "We are all Sakovans. What does that have to do with Lyra burning herself out? She has been inside that tent all day. Even you mentioned how much your healing appeared to take out of the Star."

"I have no doubt that Lyra's work today will push her to the limits of her tolerance," replied StormSong, "and I am concerned for her too, but not in the same way as you are."

"Explain yourself," frowned StarWind.

"Lyra is using magic to heal our brothers and sisters," declared StormSong, "but not only magic. Healing magic is only capable of doing so much. Lyra has far exceeded those limits."

"Well," shrugged StarWind, "Lyra is the most powerful mage in the Sakova. I would be surprised if she could not heal better than any of the others."

"You are not listening," replied StormSong. "It is more than magic. Lyra is filled with the spirit of Kaltara. He is using her to heal the critically wounded."

"An interesting theory," commented HawkShadow.

"It is not a theory, HawkShadow," frowned StormSong. "I felt it. I cannot explain the feeling to you, but Kaltara was within me. I should have died from my wounds, but something kept me going. When Lyra took my hand, I felt an inner warmth that I have never felt before in my life. When she prayed for me, I felt Kaltara within me. He will protect her."

"Then what is your concern?" asked StarWind. "If Kaltara is guiding her, you should have no concerns."

"My concern is that Lyra will continue long after Kaltara has told her to stop," frowned StormSong. "I know that sounds foolish, but Lyra is driven to heal everyone. I do not think she can accept the fact that not everyone will be healed. When that time comes, then your fears about her burning out will be valid."

“Well I am not going to let the healers keep me out of that tent any longer,” StarWind said with determination. “I will stay by Lyra’s side as long as is necessary to ensure that she does not hurt herself.”

“I will go with you,” offered HawkShadow. “StormSong?”

“Without question,” nodded the healed warrior. “I owe my life to Lyra.”

The three Sakovans approached the tent, and LifeTender rushed to intercept them.

“You cannot go in there,” declared LifeTender. “Lyra has requested that no one enter.”

“Out of our way, healer,” glared HawkShadow. “We will not interfere, but we are standing at Lyra’s side until she is done.”

“She is done,” said a Sakovan warrior as he exited the tent. “I am the last of the wounded. Lyra needs rest. Go to her.”

LifeTender joined StarWind and the others as they rushed into the tent. Lyra was sitting on the ground in the large empty tent. Her eyes were glazed over as she stared at the tent wall. The four Sakovans raced to her side and knelt next to her.

“Are you alright?” asked LifeTender.

Lyra nodded woodenly and tried to rise. HawkShadow and StarWind each grabbed one of Lyra’s arms and steadied her.

“You need to rest,” advised StarWind. “Do not try to get up. Stretch out and rest here.”

“There are more to be healed,” Lyra protested weakly. “Have the others brought into the tent.”

“There are no wounded outside that the healers cannot take care of,” assured LifeTender. “Those beyond our capabilities were all in here. You are not needed. You must rest.”

“Listen to LifeTender,” pleaded StormSong. “The Sakovans need you alive. Listen to Kaltara. He is guiding you.”

Lyra turned in a daze and stared at StormSong. She smiled weakly and nodded.

“You are wise, StormSong,” Lyra said softly. “He was the hand of the healing, and you are correct. My healing time is over. I will rest, but not in this tent. Bring the other wounded in so that they will be protected from the weather.”

HawkShadow and StarWind helped Lyra to her feet and guided her out of the tent. They led her to an area under a large fargi tree while LifeTender used a warming spell to dry the ground so that the Star would not have to rest on damp soil. Lyra sat down, but she looked up at the spymaster and the assassin before reclining.

“This war must end,” she said to the pair of Sakovans. “There is too much death and destruction. It does not please Kaltara.”

“We will destroy the Motangans as quickly as we can,” offered

HawkShadow. “We killed over three thousand last night without a single loss. We will attack them again tonight.”

“No,” frowned Lyra. “You are to arrange a truce with the Motangans.”

“A truce?” frowned StarWind. “You can’t be serious. The Motangans are tasked to destroy every single one of us. They must be killed before they decide to attack the Omungan cities. That is why we lured them into the heartland. Think of your people, Lyra.”

“I am thinking of them,” retorted the Star of Sakova. “We have lost over thirty thousand Sakovans in this war already. I want it to stop. You are authorized to halt the Motangans from leaving the heartland, and to defend our camp, but nothing else. I want a truce with our enemy. I demand to speak with Premer Doralin. Set it up.”

“You must rest,” countered HawkShadow. “We will follow your orders while you rest, but I suspect that you will change your mind when your body is refreshed.”

“Do not presume to understand me, HawkShadow,” frowned Lyra. “Set up the meeting with the Motangans.”

Lyra reclined and closed her eyes. The spymaster and the assassin stood silently over their leader and watched her fall asleep. When they were sure that Lyra was sleeping, they turned and left her side.

“How are we to approach the Motangans and ask for a truce?” frowned HawkShadow. “They are so nervous from our attacks that they are likely to skewer us as soon as we show ourselves.”

Goral approached the pair of Sakovans. It was obvious from one glance that the giant was anxious. StarWind and HawkShadow halted their conversation and turned to the approaching giant.

“Motangan soldiers have left the encampment,” announced Goral. “Around a thousand of them are marching eastward.”

“For what purpose?” frowned HawkShadow. “Are they trying to flank us?”

“Not with a thousand men,” StarWind shook her head. “It is also too many to be deserters.”

“They were marching in a controlled manner,” declared Goral. “It is not a desertion.”

“Alamar!” HawkShadow exclaimed with certainty. “They are trying to find out why their food is not being delivered.”

“And that excites you?” frowned StarWind. “Why?”

“Because it gives us what we need,” explained the assassin. “According to Lyra’s instructions, we are free to attack this group. Their defeat will also serve as our entrance to the Motangan encampment.”

“I do not understand,” replied the spymaster. “What do you have in mind?”

“I will tell you on the way,” answered HawkShadow. “Goral, find a mage and get some of the Motangan supply wagons that we captured. Have them meet us four hours march east of the Motangan encampment. StarWind and I will be organizing the war party. Join us when you can.”

“How large a war party are you planning on?” StarWind asked HawkShadow as Goral ran off to find a mage.

“How many chokas do we have?” grinned HawkShadow. “Every one of them will carry a Sakovan warrior to the spot that I am thinking of.”

* * *

Premer Cardijja paced the floor of the administration building in Meliban. His jaw was set rigidly, and his eyes were narrowed to slits as he tried to walk off the rage he felt boiling inside himself. General Luggar leaned against a wall and watched the premer carefully. He knew better than to interrupt when Cardijja was in such a mood. A black-cloaked mage entered the building, and Cardijja immediately halted his pacing and faced the new arrival.

“Well?” snapped the premer.

“The only place we can contact is Vandegar,” sighed the mage. “There is nothing wrong with the spell. Of that I am sure. None of the cities on Motanga are answering and neither is Duran. I do not understand it.”

“Get out of my sight,” bellowed Premer Cardijja. “And don’t come back until you have fixed your magic.”

Cardijja’s hands rolled into fists as the mage hurried out of the room. The premer exhaled deeply and flexed his fingers shortly after the mage had left. He sighed and shook his head, a sign that it was safe for the general to speak.

“Is it possible that something might have happened to the mages in Motanga?” the general offered softly.

“Anything is possible,” conceded the premer, “but it is hard to imagine that all of the mages on the entire island succumbed to some strange disease. Even if that was possible, how would you account for Duran?”

“Duran could have been attacked again,” shrugged General Luggar. “The Sakovans did it once before.”

“When it only had a handful of men defending it,” retorted the premer as he began pacing again. “I was told that we left an entire army in Duran this time. Ten thousand men are not easily crushed without at least some word traveling of its defeat. Yet we have heard nothing from them.”

“I have sent ships to gather more supplies,” declared General Luggar. “We will know within a few days what the problem in Duran

is."

"Are the ships armed?" asked Premer Cardijja.

"The ships carry only crews," answered Luggar. "I saw no need to send troops with them."

"Understandable," nodded Cardijja, "although I now wish they had soldiers aboard. Something is going terribly wrong with this invasion. I have this gnawing fear in my gut that is trying to warn me of impending doom."

"Are you sure that is not just a reaction to our losses on the plains of Fakara?" asked the general.

"Our losses?" echoed the premer. "You say that phrase so casually. We lost fifty thousand men to the enemy, and we have nothing to show for it. A few dead Fakarans and horses are precious little to gain from such a loss. I curse Vand and his orders."

"Careful," General Luggar softly warned his superior. "Such words carry a death sentence. You can never be sure who is listening."

"I curse them all," Cardijja said defiantly. "I begged and pleaded not to have my men stretched out over the plains of Fakara, but Tzargo demanded it. Demanded it! That fool cost me fifty thousand men for no reason. I hope that I live long enough to see him pay for that mistake."

"Quiet," urged the general. "I share your sense of frustration, but your words ill serve you. It is better that we concentrate on the future than dwell upon the past."

Premer Cardijja nodded and halted his pacing. He turned and faced his old friend. "You are right, Luggar," admitted the premer. "We must move forward. Send some ships to Motanga. Put troops on them this time. I must know what is happening abroad."

"We are going to need food shortly," replied the general. "If we load the ships with troops, we will have to leave them on Motanga to make room for the supplies. Perhaps we are better off sending some mages with the ships. Hopefully their magic will allow them to communicate what they find."

"What they find?" echoed the premer. "You suspect something nefarious has happened?"

"That is how we must think," nodded Luggar. "I am not well versed in magic, but spells do not suddenly cease to work. If our mages can communicate with Vandegar, then something is seriously wrong in Motanga and Duran. We should proceed cautiously."

Premer Cardijja stood silently for some time, his eyes staring through Luggar while he thought about his general's words. Slowly he nodded in agreement.

"Your words are wise as always," Cardijja said calmly. "Put enough mages onboard the ships to keep a constant stream of

communications open. I want to know precisely when the spell fails, if it does fail. Find out if we have any mages present that are capable of contacting Alamar or Raven's Point. We need to get to the bottom of this problem."

"I will see to it immediately," promised the general. "What about the armies? Are we to stay in Meliban or hunt down the Fakarans?"

"We move tomorrow to hunt down the Fakarans," declared the premer.

"It is my understanding that we were attacked from both the east and the west on the plains," responded General Luggar. "Which direction are we going to pursue? Or will you divide the army and pursue both camps of Fakarans?"

"We are going to head eastward," declared the premer. "The tracks leading out of Meliban were much too obvious. They wanted us to pursue them to the west. I will not play their game. In the morning we will march northward along the Meliban River. When we get to the southern fork of the river, I will decide which branch to follow."

"A wise move," nodded General Luggar. "Let Shamal's troops deal with the western hordes after they are done with Khadora."

"You think Shamal will have an easy time of it in Khadora?" asked Cardijja.

"I would not say an easy time," Luggar shook his head. "The Khadorans are the most organized lot the enemy have, but the Khadorans will stand and fight. They will not run and hide, as the Fakarans are wont to do. Just finding the Fakarans will take up the bulk of our time."

"That is a problem," nodded Cardijja. "We are also tasked with finding Angragar, so the search for Fakarans will not be in vain. Our scouts also report that there are large forests to the east of the Meliban River. Fighting in such an environment will limit the capabilities of these Fakaran horsemen. They may charge swiftly on the plains, but they cannot do so in the woods."

"I look forward to that," smiled General Luggar. "What about the port of Meliban and our supply lines?"

"We will leave ten thousand men to secure this city," answered Premer Cardijja. "They can spend their time fortifying it against the Fakaran hordes. Our supply caravans will be heavily guarded. That will be our weakest point and the most alluring target for the Fakarans. I would like to set up some traps for the enemy along our supply routes. It will be most demoralizing to them that they are not able to disrupt our supplies."

Chapter 21

Unexpected Arrivals

HawkShadow waved a large white flag in the air and shouted for attention. The flag was crudely made from the white uniform of a deceased Imperial Guard and attached to a long branch. StarWind stood alongside the assassin and held her hands well away from her sword. They were quickly noticed, and nearby Motangan soldiers flowed out of their tents and unsheathed their swords. Ranks of archers soon appeared, but no one came out to meet the Sakovans.

"I didn't think our flag of truce would be very welcome just yet," HawkShadow said under his breathe. "They have not been sufficiently terrorized. I have learned to gauge such things rather well."

"I have no doubt about that," replied the spymaster, "but we will follow Lyra's orders. She wants a truce, and we will get one, no matter what it takes."

"Oh," grinned HawkShadow, "we will have one before the day is out. Count on it. Look. A black cloak has managed to survive."

StarWind gazed into the Motangan encampment and saw a mage and a general conversing behind the line of archers. Her lips curled with hatred as she watched the two men.

"His name is Zatho," spat StarWind. "He is the one who captured me. His heart is dark, and I would love to liberate it from his body."

"I would assume that is true of all Motangan mages," shrugged HawkShadow.

"I have no way of knowing that," replied StarWind, "but Zatho seems to delight in torture. I am sure that he was extremely disappointed to find me missing from the encampment."

"They are waving us forward," HawkShadow said. "I am not sure that we can trust them."

"I will not trust Zatho," declared StarWind as she raised her hand and waved for the Motangans to come outside the perimeter of the camp. "This meeting will be on neutral ground or not at all."

The stalemate lasted for over ten minutes, as each side tried to get the other to come forward. Finally, HawkShadow shook his head in frustration.

"I am going forward half the distance to the perimeter," he said. "You may remain here. If they attack me, flee."

"I am going with you," StarWind declared. "I will not show cowardice to the enemy, but we go no further than half way."

“Agreed,” nodded HawkShadow as they started walking forward.

They quickly covered half the distance to the perimeter and stopped. HawkShadow called loudly for representatives to come and talk. The Motangans continued to wave for the Sakovans to come closer, but HawkShadow shook his head exaggeratedly. Eventually the general and Zatho came forward and stopped a few paces away.

“You are afraid to enter our camp?” Zatho sneered at StarWind. “I thought all Sakovans were brave.”

“It took you long enough to come out and meet us, Zatho,” retorted StarWind. “You should not question the bravery of two Sakovans who have already been inside your encampment.”

“Enough,” scowled the Motangan general. “What is the purpose of this meeting?”

“The Star of Sakova wishes to meet under the flag of truce with Premer Doralin,” stated HawkShadow. “We have been sent to request such a meeting.”

“Is the Star of Sakova intending to surrender?” asked the general.

“Surrender?” laughed HawkShadow. “We are not the ones starving to death.”

“Then you are wasting our time,” spat Zatho. “Crawl back to your camp and prepare to die. There will be no meeting and no truce.”

“We do not know the reason for the meeting,” StarWind interjected quickly. “We have only been sent to request one.”

Zatho grinned victoriously, and StarWind glared at the black cloak.

“I do not know where you get your information,” stated the general, “but we have no problems with our supplies. If you can guarantee that the Star of Sakova wishes to surrender, I will recommend that Premer Doralin appoint someone to discuss terms with her. I can see no other reason for such a meeting.”

HawkShadow opened his mouth to speak, but StarWind cut him off.

“The meeting must be between the Star of Sakova and Premer Doralin,” the spymaster stated. “No other Motangan is acceptable. We will come back tomorrow morning to ask once again for the meeting. In the meantime I suggest that you reevaluate your food stocks.”

HawkShadow and StarWind backed slowly away from the Motangans. Zatho’s hand rose menacingly, but the general reached out and restrained the mage.

“You will never break a truce in such a manner without the premer’s instructions,” berated the general. “Join me in a trip to Doralin’s tent. He will want to hear both of our impressions of this meeting.”

The meeting had been held close enough to the Motangan

encampment that some of the soldiers had been able to listen in. Word spread quickly through the encampment, and hopes of a Sakovan surrender raised the spirits of the Motangans. The general and Zatho reported immediately to the premer's tent. General Valatosa was present when they arrived. The general reported the conversation verbatim, adding in as many of the nonverbal details as he could.

"Why was I not called?" asked Premer Doralin.

"I feared that it might be a trap," stated the general. "While our archers would have surely avenged our deaths, I would not want the premer to be in such an indefensible position."

"A fair answer," Doralin nodded with satisfaction. "What do you make of their request?"

"I am puzzled," admitted the general. "Their tone was certainly confrontational, but the woman seemed to leave open the possibility of a Sakovan surrender. Frankly, I don't trust them. The Sakovan tactics have been irregular. If they had met us in the open and fought, they would have been annihilated long ago. I suspect trickery."

"The Sakovans are not to be trusted," interjected Zatho who had remained silent so far. "The female was StarWind. She is the one who escaped from here after being taken hostage. I was led to believe that the male with her was the one who rescued her. I think they intend to assassinate you in the hopes that the rest of us will flee."

"A possibility," nodded General Valatosa. "The fact that the Star of Sakova chose the two people who have already been into this camp as messengers might be significant. StarWind knows what you look like, Doralin. There is danger lurking in this proposed meeting."

"True," nodded Doralin, "but their evaluation of our food problem is very accurate. If we don't get some food into this camp in the next day or two, we must break off the fight. Do you think that the Sakovans might know about the men we sent to Alamar?"

"That is possible," shrugged Valatosa, "but not certain. The Sakovans are surely to the west of us, and might have missed our men going east, but they also seem to have no trouble finding our camp. It is just as likely that their spies reported the column leaving."

"Which is why they must strike now," interjected Zatho. "They know that we will guard the food caravans with a great number of men. We will only be anxious to talk to them while we are hungry. Once the food shipment arrives, there will be no reason to discuss anything with the savages. It is all a trick. I say that we wait them out."

"Your advice has been noted, Zatho," frowned the premer. "Valatosa?"

"If it were not for their insistence that you be present," Valatosa replied, "I would suggest accepting the meeting, but some fears are

justified here. I personally would like to hear what they have to say. Such a personal meeting always gives one an insight into the enemy's state of mind."

"Well said," nodded Doralin. "I, too, am curious. Would the Star of Sakova actually expose herself to danger so close to our camp? Do we have any way to verify her identity?"

"Clarvoy reported that she bears a strange mark on one of her fingers," offered Zatho. "It is a blue star that she normally keeps covered by a ring."

"A tattoo?" asked the premer.

"Not a tattoo," Zatho shook his head. "It was described as a blue gem imbedded in her skin. There is a possibility that we can turn the tables on the Sakovans," the mage added with a grin. "We could accept the meeting and assassinate the Star of Sakova. It would demoralize the enemy and make their destruction that much easier."

Doralin frowned at the mage and shook his head. "The two of you are dismissed," he said with finality. "In the future, I will be notified personally before any more such meetings take place. Make sure that the entire camp is informed of my order."

The general saluted and led Zatho out of the tent. Doralin shook his head and spat towards the door flap.

"I detest such people," he said with disgust. "Where does Vand find them?"

"The mage ranks are full of them," replied General Valatosa. "While it may hamper our ability to communicate, I do not miss the mages we lost at the ridge. They were a despicable lot."

"Well," sighed Doralin, "the Sakovans missed one of the worst. Zatho is like a rabid dog. He should be put down."

* * *

It was late afternoon when the wagons appeared. Cheers and shouts of joy started at the eastern edge of the perimeter and soon rippled through the entire encampment. The sentries quickly moved aside as the wagon train galloped into the encampment. Motangan soldiers crawled out of their tents and rushed to form a human corridor for the food shipment. Even Premer Doralin came out of his tent to see what the commotion was about. General Valatosa was at his side. They watched the first wagon race past and smiled broadly. Doralin's smile faded almost instantly when the second wagon came into view.

"Something is wrong," Doralin scowled. "There is no escort."

"And the soldiers driving the teams are too wooden," added Valatosa.

"Stop those wagons!" shouted the premer, but his words went unheard.

The Motangan camp was roaring with cheers. The jubilation finally died when one of the wagons ran over a tent stake and crashed. The wagon flipped, spewing dead Motangan soldiers over the nearby tents. The encampment grew deadly quiet as word quickly spread. Soldiers leaped out and halted the wagons. Others sprang forward and ripped off the canvas coverings. Howls of protest and revenge spread through the encampment like wildfire. Premer Doralin clenched his fists in rage.

"Get me a count of the bodies," the premer snapped at General Valatosa. "I want them identified, although I suspect that I already know who they are. Report to me as soon as you are done."

The premer spun around and marched into his tent. General Valatosa sighed heavily and walked off to do his duty. He already knew whom the bodies belonged to. He recognized more than one of the soldiers who had just recently been sent to Alamar. He also knew that Doralin would now accept the invitation to parley with the Sakovans in the morning. He walked to the nearest wagon and inspected the way that the dead Motangan soldier had been tied to the seat of the wagon. He shook his head and spat on the ground in disgust.

* * *

Thousands of Khadoran archers lined the western side of the second trench, while thousands of Motangan archers opposed them on the eastern side. Arrows flew through the air in numbers uncountable. Bodies on both sides of the trench fell and were immediately replaced by others. Lord Saycher of the Morgar clan watched from a knoll a safe distance behind the front lines. He cursed at the losses his forces were taking and called for an air mage.

"The archers are to move back twenty paces," Lord Saycher barked at the air mage. "The Motangans are killing too many of our men."

The air mage nodded and sent the message out to other air mages all along the front lines. Lord Saycher watched as the archers began to move backward. The Motangan archers immediately moved to the brink of the trench, trying to extend the reach of their arrows. Behind the Motangan archers, enemy soldiers started carrying long planks forward. Suddenly, an officer wearing the orange and yellow of the Balomar clan galloped up the knoll. He leaped off his horse and raced over to Lord Saycher.

"What are you doing?" shouted the officer. "Why did you order the archers moved back?"

"Because they were dying too quickly, Marshal Berman," Lord Saycher replied brusquely. "What would you have me do? Should I let the Motangans kill them all? It was your advice to move back earlier.

Now you try to fault me for it."

"My advice was to withdraw to the third trench," snapped Marshal Berman, "not to move the archers back and allow the Motangans to cross this trench. They will swarm all over our armies before we can retreat in an orderly fashion. Either defend the trench or retreat to the next. There is only death and defeat in half way measures."

"The third trench is the last," retorted Lord Saycher. "We cannot afford to give up ground so quickly. The Emperor has asked us to buy time to assemble the armies of the Imperial Valley. That is exactly what I am doing."

"That is not what you will accomplish," scowled Marshal Berman. "Where is your marshal? Ask him for his advice if you do not believe me."

"He is dead," scowled Lord Saycher. "Besides, he would have agreed with my orders. I was the marshal of the Morgar clan before I became lord. I think that I can handle the job."

"I think not," Marshal Berman retorted emphatically. "You are not waging war against another Khadoran clan, Lord Saycher. There are several hundred thousand Motangans on the other side of that trench. They can afford to fill that trench with the bodies of their dead and march over them if they have to. You must order a retreat to the third trench immediately. This battle is lost."

"You are distracting me, Marshal Berman," snapped Lord Saycher. "Please remove yourself from my presence."

Marshal Berman whirled around and stormed off. He marched purposely towards the group of air mages at the rear of the knoll and picked one out.

"I need to talk with the Emperor immediately," Marshal Berman said softly.

The air mage nodded dutifully and wove an air tunnel to Khadoratung. Within moments Emperor Marak spoke into the air tunnel.

"I am sorry for this breach of protocol, Emperor Marak," the Balomar marshal said, "but it must be done. This is Marshal Berman and the situation at the second trench is critical."

"I recognize your voice, Marshal," replied the Emperor. "What is the problem?"

"This army cannot be run under Lord Saycher," the marshal said emphatically. "While he may be a strong ally of yours, his actions will cost the lives of many Khadorans."

"This is very disturbing to hear," frowned the Emperor. "I have a great deal of faith in the Morgar lord and his marshal, as I do you. Why do you feel that there is a problem?"

“The Morgar marshal is dead,” replied Marshal Berman. “Were he alive, I believe he would agree with me. The second trench is about to be overrun, but we have not even started to move towards the third trench yet. Lord Saycher believes that he is buying your armies more time, but he does not realize the speed with which we will be overrun. Our infantry and mages will be unable to reach the third trench in time to get across safely. We are about to have a catastrophe of unspeakable dimensions.”

“What is your solution, Marshal Berman?” asked the Emperor.

“We must start the retreat immediately,” Berman said without hesitation. “The archers will have to be brought forward and probably sacrificed unless we can get reinforcements to slow down the Motangans. Saycher just ordered the archers to move twenty paces back from the rim of the trench. That is all the Motangans need to bring planks forward, which they are in the process of doing.”

“Do you understand the implications of my overriding Lord Saycher’s orders?” asked the Emperor.

“I do,” replied Marshal Berman. “I am willing to take full responsibility for this decision. I will forfeit my life, but you must order the retreat. If you do not, thousands will die needlessly.”

There was a long silent pause at the Khadoratung end of the air tunnel. Marshal Berman knew that there would be a heavy political price to pay for countermanding Lord Saycher’s orders, but he also believed that it was necessary. He was prepared to murder the Morgar lord if it was the only way.

“Get me Lord Saycher,” the Emperor commanded the air mage.

The air mage walked towards Lord Saycher, carrying the air tunnel with her. Marshal Berman followed silently.

“Lord Saycher,” said the air mage, “Emperor Marak wishes to speak to you.”

Lord Saycher turned and looked at the air mage. He saw Marshal Berman, and his lips curled in rage.

“Yes, Emperor,” Lord Saycher said calmly into the air tunnel.

“Lord Saycher,” Emperor Marak said, “I am ordering you to come to Khadoratung immediately to discuss the fighting in the east. I am placing Marshal Berman in command of the armies.”

“He will retreat,” objected Lord Saycher. “You cannot allow him to cut and run without putting up a fight. I protest this decision.”

“I am aware of Marshal Berman’s intentions,” replied the Torak, “but I am also aware of your reservations. I intend for something in between to occur, but that is no longer your concern. Do not misinterpret my commands. I am pleased with your service, and this is not meant as an insult or rebuke to you or the Morgar clan, but I want you back here in Khadoratung. Is Marshal Berman there?”

“I am here,” the marshal said loudly.

“Can you hold the Motangans for an hour?” asked the Emperor.

“At a cost,” nodded the Balomar marshal. “I can move the archers forward and threaten with a cavalry charge. That should buy us an hour, but we will lose many archers.”

“Do it,” commanded the Emperor, “and start the retreat. Stage the retreat with fallback archers if possible, but get those most vulnerable headed for the third trench. Use the cavalry only after the Motangans have moved out of sight of the second trench. Do you understand?”

“Perfectly,” answered the marshal. “Are you planning on sending reinforcements? Why the hour delay?”

“Reinforcements are coming,” smiled Marak, “but not anything that you or the Motangans would expect. Give the orders, Marshal. Time is running out.”

The mage reported that the air tunnel had dropped, and Marshal Berman called for the air mages to gather around him. He started issuing orders to put the delaying plan into action. The Khadoran archers moved forward under a hail of Motangan arrows. The mages and infantry began a run towards the third trench several leagues away. The Khadoran cavalry charged towards the trench, but turned away at the last moment. The Motangan archers panicked each time that it appeared as if the Khadoran cavalry would leap over the trench. After several charges without any attack, the Motangans began to ignore the cavalry. Marshal Berman ordered the horsemen to withdraw and set up defensive positions beyond the view of the second trench. The requested hour sped by, and no word came from the air mages regarding any reinforcements. Marshal Berman began to doubt the help that Emperor Marak had promised.

Unexpectedly, shouts rose over the din of the battle from the north end of the fighting. Marshal Berman rose on his toes to see what the commotion was about, but he could see nothing. The shouting grew louder as it came closer to the knoll that Marshal Berman stood on. The shouts came from both sides of the trench, but still the marshal could see no reason for it. He frowned in frustration.

Suddenly, he saw the source of the commotion. His mouth fell open as he watched the dragon soaring just above the level of the ground on the enemy’s side of the trench. It held Motangan soldiers in each claw, and Emperor Marak sat on its back. The Balomar marshal’s eyes grew wide as he watched the emperor throw magical spells at the Motangans. Sheets of fire flew from one hand while spinning blades of light emanated from the other. The marshal shook his head in disbelief. The dragon tossed the Motangan bodies into the crowd of enemy soldiers and snared two more while flames shout out of its mouth.

Marshal Berman watched the dragon speed by, knocking hundreds of Motangan archers into the trench. Other Motangans tried to turn around and flee, but that was impossible. There was no room for them to retreat. Magical fireballs started soaring towards the speeding dragon as the Motangan mages tried to kill it or its rider, but the dragon was flying too low and too fast for them to hit it. Some of the fireballs flew into the Khadoran archers, but even more fell on the Motangan side of the trench. The enemy mages were too far from the trench to be effective.

As the dragon sped out of view, Marshal Berman gazed back along its path. The enemy side of the trench was bare of humans for a dozen paces beyond the rim, and the Motangans were not pushing forward any more. In fact, those nearest the rim were trying to force their way further away from it. Far to the south, the dragon rose into the sky. Some Motangan mages still tried to reach the dragon as fireballs flew into the sky, but its altitude was too great. Unexpectedly, a voice spoke loudly to Marshal Berman. It was the voice of the Torak.

"Start a full scale retreat, Berman," the Emperor said. "I will try to buy you time with the threat of another pass by the dragon. Do not delay."

Within seconds the voice was gone. Marshal Berman did not attempt to reply to the Emperor's message. He started snapping off orders to the air mages. His attention was split between the retreating armies and the dragon. While he tried to keep a close eye on the retreat to make sure that no problems were occurring, he could not help watching the dragon swoop lower whenever the Motangans tried to approach the rim of the trench.

On several occasions, the Motangan mages came close to hitting the dragon. Enemy archers also took a shot at trying to hit it, but the marshal swore that the dragon laughed at them whenever they tried. He shook his head in disbelief. Not only did he not believe in dragons, but also he could not believe that the Emperor was a mage. He had fought alongside Marak at the battle of Balomar and would never have guessed that he held magical power in his hands. He wondered what the Khadoran soldiers would think of an emperor who was also a mage.

Marshal Berman pushed the thoughts from his mind and concentrated on the retreat. He smiled broadly when he received the message that the infantry had reached the third trench. When the message came in that the mages were also crossing the bridge, he knew that the Emperor had saved the day. The Balamor marshal waved to the dragon and ordered the archers to retreat. He called for his own horse and ordered the air mages to mount up. As he rode past the defensive cavalry positions, he saw the dragon high in the sky

heading north. He smiled broadly and waved even though he knew his gesture would go unseen. As far as the marshal was concerned, he was thrilled to have an emperor mage.

Chapter 22

Revealing Surprises

Myka circled high over the second trench until the Khadoran infantry and mages were safely beyond the third and final trench. The Torak spoke briefly, and the dragon banked away to the northwest. Emperor Marak gazed down as the Khadoran soldiers waved at the dragon overhead. He smiled inwardly and wondered what the ramifications might be when others heard about the dragon and the emperor mage that rode her. Both were secrets that Marak had held closely, but the time for such secrets was over. Marak sighed anxiously as Myka headed for the Khadoran city of Sintula where the armies of the Imperial Valley were gathering.

Sintula, the third largest city in Khadora, was situated at the convergence of the Lituk and Khadora rivers. The skies around Sintula were already thick with smoke as the Khadorans burned their fields to prevent the food from falling to the enemy. Whatever crops could be harvested were already on their way to Khadoratung to feed the refugees and fill warehouses for the armies to draw from.

Myka flew into the thick smoke, seemingly unconcerned with the lack of visibility. Marak's eyes teared with irritation, and his lungs felt taut as he inhaled the heavy smoke. The time in the clouds of smoke seemed to last forever, and Marak inhaled deeply when the dragon flew out of the smoke. He looked down at Sintula, its white buildings contrasting with the dark green forests and brown fields surrounding it. He wiped the tears from his eyes and coughed to clear his lungs as Myka turned into a spiraling descent. As the dragon dropped lower, the citizens of Sintula noticed her. Fearful shouts rose up to greet the Torak as people scurried through the city streets to find shelter from the huge beast.

Marak gazed beyond the city to a sea of tents in a newly cleared portion of the forest bordering Sintula. Colorful banners flew from long poles outside the tents, and the Torak sought out the colors of the clans that formed the Lords' Council. Near the center of the makeshift camp he saw the purple and yellow of the Neju clan. Nearby were the banners of the Organila, Nordon, Scratti, Walkan, and Aritor clans. A large open rectangle sat in the center of the six encampments.

"Head for the large rectangle in the center," the Torak said to the dragon. "The soldiers do not know of you so be careful. And try not to frighten them," Marak added with a chuckle.

“Bah,” snorted Myka as she turned her snout downward and dove at the troops. “I am a dragon. Humans are supposed to fear me. Hang on.”

Officers shouted orders and soldiers scurried to defend themselves as the dragon approached. Arrows started flying upwards towards the dragon long before she was within range. Myka responded by belching long flames towards the ground, and some of the soldiers ran for cover, but most of the Khadorans held their ground.

“Hmmph,” scowled Myka. “Are they so foolish to stand there when I can burn their flesh before they hurt me?”

“Not foolish, Myka,” smiled Emperor Marak. “They are brave men. They understand that you can bring death upon them, but they are standing for their country and their loved ones. I advise a gentler approach.”

The dragon suddenly shot upward to stay outside the range of the Khadoran arrows. Marak drew the Sword of Torak and held it high. It was a gamble that immediately paid off. While some soldiers saw the sword as threatening, others recognized it for what it was. As Myka circled over the encampment, a resonating chant rippled through the Khadoran armies. It began in the Nordon camp and spread outward as bows were lowered and swords were held high as a form of salute. The sound drifted upwards and brought a smile to Marak’s lips.

“Torak! Torak! Torak!” chanted the soldiers.

Myka continued to circle, basking in the chant, as the large rectangular area was made clear of soldiers.

“They love you,” the dragon remarked.

“As they will come to love you,” grinned Marak. “Be on good behavior. These people are our people.”

Myka did not respond as she spread her wings wide and glided towards the ground. The chanting continued until the dragon was on the ground and then wild cheers erupted as Marak slid off of Myka’s back. Waiting at the edge of the cleared area were the members of the Lords’ Council. They bowed in respect as the emperor approached. Other clans’ lords gathered around to hear the words of the Emperor.

“There are still secrets that you keep from us,” greeted Lord Patel of the Nordon clan.

“A few,” smiled Emperor Marak. “Perhaps it is time to end the secrets. I am glad that you recognized me up there. I would hate to see a battle between friends. The dragon is named Myka. She is a formidable foe.”

“Actually,” offered Lord Jamarat of the Neju clan, “we did not recognize you. Latril used an air tunnel to let the armies at the trenches know of the danger presented by a dragon behind their lines. They told us of your attack on the enemy.”

“Then you already know more of my secrets,” sighed the Torak.

“That you are a mage?” asked Lord Kiamesh of the Scratti clan. “How is that possible? For generations all Khadoran mages have been female. Now all of a sudden, male mages appear. It makes no sense.”

“The Chula have male shaman,” replied Marak. “The Qubari and elves have male mages. So do the Omungans and Sakovans, and obviously the Motangans do as well. Why should Khadora be any different?”

“Because for generations we have closed our eyes to the truth?” proposed Lord Chenowith of the Walkan clan.

“Precisely,” nodded Marak. “There is one more secret that I have held from you,” he frowned. “Perhaps now is the time to reveal it.”

“I advise caution,” warned Lord Chenowith. “Perhaps there are some things that are best kept concealed.”

The other lords looked at Lord Chenowith questioningly, but Emperor Marak suddenly saw the Walkan lord in a new light.

“You know?” he asked softly.

“My father discovered it,” Lord Chenowith nodded. “I read it in his papers.”

“And he said nothing?” frowned the Emperor. “Why?”

“I cannot answer that question,” replied Lord Chenowith. “He did not confide in me regarding such things.”

“What is it?” demanded Lord Quilo of the Organila clan. “What drastic thing could be so terrible that you would not tell your friends?”

“It is not us that Marak fears,” interjected Lord Patel. “It is the reaction of our Khadoran brothers and sisters that he fears, and maybe his fears are justified. Perhaps Khadorans must be fed the truth slowly. Our ways have been ancient and barbaric. Only time can heal such things.”

“You know as well?” Marak asked in surprise. “How can this be?”

“Am I the only one in the dark?” asked Lord Faliman of the Aritor clan. “I demand to know what is being discussed. There must be no secrets between us if we are to defeat the Motangans.”

Lord Patel sighed and nodded at the Aritor lord. “Faliman is right,” he said softly. “It is hardly a secret to anyone who has been paying attention to events around them. We have been told about the Time of Calling. We know that it is heralded in by mixed marriages. We also know that the Astor is half Qubari, and the Star of Sakova is half Sakovan. Your secret, Torak, should be a surprise to no one.”

Marak smiled tautly and nodded. He inhaled deeply and said, “I am half Chula. My father is Ukaro, head shaman of the Zatong tribe.”

Silence and shocked faces surrounded the group after the Torak’s announcement. While the members of the Lords’ Council nodded with

understanding, the other lords gasped openly. It was an awkward moment, but Marak felt unburdened that the truth was finally known. Unexpectedly, Lord Kiamesh started laughing.

"That's it?" chuckled Lord Kiamesh. "Your big secret is that your father was a Chula? For a moment I thought you might reveal that you were a mage or rode a pet dragon."

"Or that you were the first Emperor of Khadora to unite all of the people of this continent in a common cause," grinned Lord Chenowith.

"Or that you were the most accomplished warrior ever to walk the fields of Khadora," smiled Lord Quilo. "It is no small wonder about your Chula heritage. I have learned to appreciate the Chula after witnessing what they are capable of. They did, after all, take Alamar with only a thousand men."

The other lords lost their expressions of shock and started nodding in agreement. Lord Patel ordered ale for the lords and led the group in a toast to the Torak. When the short moment of merriment was complete, the Lords' Council and the Torak retired to Lord Patel's tent.

"Thank you for what you did out there," Marak said quietly to the members of the Lords' Council. "I know that your public reactions will soften the shock when the rumors spread."

"I do not know about the shock," replied Lord Quilo, "but our words were heartfelt. We Khadorans have lived too long under false pretenses. We should never be afraid of the truth. We are, after all, a people who have claimed to highly value the truth. We should not run from it when it stares us in the face."

"I agree," nodded Lord Chenowith. "Let there never be secrets between us again."

"Speaking of secrets and magic," frowned Lord Faliman. "There is something that has been bothering me about this war that we are waging."

"Speak," the Torak responded.

"You have pioneered the use of battle mages," Lord Faliman continued. "I have heard glowing remarks about their use at the Battle of Balomar, and I know that we have thousands of mages at the trenches, yet all they do is get in the way of the retreats. Why have we not used their magical abilities?"

"A fair question," nodded Marak, "and it does fall under the category of closely held secrets. Not even the commanders in the field understand what the mages are out there for. Perhaps that is wrong of me, but I will explain it to you now."

The other lords nodded and waited anxiously for the explanation.

"My mother, Glenda, is a mage," stated Emperor Marak. "She is currently leading the mages at the trenches. The instructions that I

gave her were to aid the field commanders in any way that they could, but not to unleash their full fury until the appropriate time."

"And when is the appropriate time?" frowned Lord Kiamesh. "We have large losses at the trenches. Soldiers are dying to ensure the safe retreat of the mages, and yet the mages do little to warrant their being near the front. It would seem prudent to me to utilize every weapon at our disposal."

"The mages could be used to kill more Motangan soldiers," admitted Marak, "but I think there is a more important use for them. We know that the Motangans have a large contingent of their own mages, but we do not know what their capabilities are. I have instructed Glenda to use the full fury of our mages as soon as the Motangan mages make their move. It is extremely important to eliminate magical threats to our armies."

"So Glenda will act on her own when the time comes?" asked Lord Patel. "The commanders will not know that it is coming?"

"Precisely," nodded Marak. "I cannot describe to the commanders under what circumstances our mages will attack because I do not know. Only an experienced mage will know when the time is right."

"Isn't there another mage who could handle that duty?" asked Lord Chenowith. "Putting your mother on the front lines is an extreme sacrifice. Your whole family is likely to die in this war."

"We may all die," shrugged the Torak. "Besides, I did not appoint Glenda to her task. She was chosen by the other mages to lead them. I trust in their judgment now, as I always have."

* * *

HawkShadow and StarWind approached the Motangan encampment in the Sakovan heartland. Once again, HawkShadow carried the large makeshift white flag. There was no bantering from the Motangan encampment, although archers immediately took up position as the Sakovans approached. The Sakovans halted where they had the day before and waited silently. The minutes passed by slowly, but eventually Premer Doralin and General Valatosa came into view. They walked to the perimeter of the Motangan encampment and waved the Sakovans closer. HawkShadow and StarWind exchanged nervous glances, but they eventually nodded and walked forward.

"You should have come forward to meet us halfway," frowned HawkShadow when they were close enough to be heard.

"There is no half way," replied Premer Doralin. "Inside this perimeter is Motangan land; outside is Sakovan. Therefore, the perimeter is half way. Speak your piece."

"We have come once again to request a truce and meeting between Premer Doralin and the Star of Sakova," declared StarWind. "Will you agree to such a meeting?"

“Define your terms for a truce,” countered the Motangan premer.

“There will be no fighting between us,” replied HawkShadow. “Your people will not leave the encampment, and ours will not enter it.”

“That would prohibit us from having scouts,” frowned General Valatosa. “And what about supply deliveries?”

“I should think yesterday’s delivery is evidence enough that you will not be receiving any more,” retorted HawkShadow. “As for your scouts, keep your men inside the perimeter where they will be safe.”

“You arrogant pup,” growled General Valatosa.

Premer Doralin raised his hand for silence. He glared at HawkShadow, but he spoke softly and calmly.

“I will meet with the Star of Sakova,” he declared, “but only on my terms. The truce will begin when the Star of Sakova comes into view, and it will end when she disappears from view. If you intend to continue to interrupt our supply caravans, you will do so at great risk to your forces.”

“You want the Star of Sakova to stand here in range of your archers?” gasped StarWind. “That is unacceptable.”

“The meeting will be held in my tent in the center of our encampment,” replied Premer Doralin. “I am sure you remember the way there, StarWind. Regarding my archers, I will personally guarantee the safety of the Star of Sakova and her party, which must not number more than two others. That is my offer. Take it or leave it.”

“You are mad,” spat HawkShadow.

StarWind gently placed her hand on HawkShadow’s arm as she watched the Motangan premer shake his head and begin to turn around.

“Your terms are acceptable,” StarWind said loudly, “but I will hold you personally responsible for her safety, Doralin. If harm comes to the Star of Sakova, your life is forfeit. You know that we are quite capable of infiltrating your encampment. We have done it before, and we will do it again.”

The premer turned and glared at StarWind, but he nodded slowly before turning and marching towards the center of the Motangan encampment.

* * *

“There are three ships on the horizon,” General Santiock declared as he stood before Vand’s disciple in the atrium of the temple in Vandamar. “They appear to be ours.”

“Any idea where they are coming from?” asked Xavo.

“From their approach,” replied the general, “I would suggest Fakara, but I cannot be sure.”

“We have had no word of their arrival,” frowned Xavo as he looked over at Lady Mystic.

“I will contact them,” offered Lady Mystic as she rose and hurried up the stairs to the roof.

“Has there been any more word from the other armies,” Santiock asked with concern.

“Last I heard,” Xavo said with apparent unconcern, “is that the elves were on the run. I am sure our armies will return victorious in a day or two. I would not concern yourself.”

“Xavo,” frowned the general, “we have known each other for some time. You can level with me. I fear that something is amiss.”

Xavo gazed into the eyes of the man who had dragged Xavo from the fire when Aakuta died. He knew Santiock as a decent man, but telling him the truth was not an option. Santiock was now the last remaining general on the Island of Darkness, and his ten thousand men were defending the city of Vandamar. Within a day the elves would attack and the last fight for control of Motanga would begin. The luxury of personal feelings could not be allowed to intrude into Xavo’s planning.

“You worry too much, Santiock,” smiled Xavo. “The elves do not have enough ships to bring a large force to this island. Surely twenty thousand men can hunt them down and kill them.”

“I guess it is the lack of news one way or the other that bothers me,” admitted Santiock. “We have only had the capability of air tunnels for a short time, but it has changed everything that we do. Had this occurred last year, I would have no concerns at all, but with air tunnels, we should have had word by now.”

“We have had word,” countered Xavo. “Lady Mystic spoke to them not an hour ago. As I said, they are chasing the elves southward. Motanga is a large island, Santiock. Give the armies time to do a complete job.”

“I guess you are right,” nodded the general, “but this city seems so empty. There is no one in the temple besides you and Lady Mystic. Even the other mages are absent. It seems like we are guarding a ghost town.”

“There are still thousands of citizens to protect,” smiled Xavo. “As for the mages, I cannot discuss their mission. They will return when the time is right. Go and relax with your men. Perhaps you should hold a feast to take their minds off things. I will authorize it if you wish. It will do wonders for the spirits of the men.”

“Perhaps that would divert them from their worries,” nodded Santiock. “Idle soldiers are never a happy lot. I wish my army had been chosen to fight the elves. At least that would make us feel like we are contributing to the war effort.”

“You will get your chance to fight soon,” smiled Xavo. “I understand that your army is soon to be rotated to Khadora, but do not let on that you know. It is supposed to be a secret.”

“Really?” brightened Santiock. “That will make the men feel useful. Perhaps a celebration festival is in order after all.”

“Just don’t let them know the real reason for the celebration,” grinned Xavo. “Begone. Go and enjoy the company of your men while you can.”

Santiock smiled broadly and left the temple. Moments later Lady Mystic raced down the stairs from the roof.

“There are twelve mages on the ships,” she reported. “They are indeed from Fakara. They have been sent to discover the nature of the air tunnel failures.”

“This is not good,” frowned Xavo. “If they can communicate with Fakara, our secret will be discovered. We will have ten thousand angry soldiers and a dozen mages against us in a hurry. We must stop them from communicating with Meliban.”

“I already have,” grinned Lady Mystic.

“How?” asked Xavo.

“I used an air tunnel to talk to them,” explained Vand’s daughter, “but I told them that it must be the last communication they make before we speak to them personally. I explained how the Khadorans had tricked us into using air tunnels and warned them not to use the spell any more.”

“I do not understand,” Xavo shook his head. “What are you talking about?”

“I am talking about the compulsion spell that travels inside air tunnels,” grinned Lady Mystic. “I told the mages that the Khadorans were utilizing our air tunnels for nefarious means, and that every time we cast one, there was a chance that it carried a Khadoran compulsion spell. I explained how hundreds of mages in Khadora had been subverted using air tunnels, and how they turned on one another.”

“And they bought it?” asked Xavo.

“They would be foolish not to,” laughed Lady Mystic. “After all, the hellsoul spell is really a strong compulsion spell. All Motangan mages have learned to fear such compulsions. Besides, I told them that I could teach them a way to protect themselves when they arrived, so they are only being asked to halt the use of the spell for a short time. There is no real cost for their obedience. Or so they think.”

“But we both know differently,” grinned Xavo. “What is your plan?”

* * *

“Hurry to the temple,” Lady Mystic said as the twelve black cloaks gathered on the docks. “I want to teach you the modifications

to the air tunnel spell before you rest from the journey. This information must make its way back to Fakara."

"Why haven't you communicated it yourself?" asked one of the mages as the group made its way towards the temple. "It certainly is important enough to be delivered immediately."

"It is too dangerous over such a long distance," explained Lady Mystic. "While I am protected by the modifications, those on the other end of the air tunnel are not. I dare not expose my father to such a threat."

"But mages are using the unmodified air tunnel right now in Fakara," argued a mage. "Every minute they use the unmodified spell brings the chance of great harm to our forces. We must send word back immediately."

"No," Lady Mystic said harshly. "Do not be a fool. The Khadorans do not even know that we have landed in Fakara yet. To send a message there is to invite chaos. They have ships patrolling the waters and listening for air tunnels. The modifications must be personally delivered to Fakara and taught to our mages. That is what the twelve of you will do."

"Is this why we cannot contact Alamar or Duran or Raven's Point?" asked a mage. "Have you stopped all communications with them?"

"Yes," nodded Lady Mystic as the group climbed the steps of the temple. "I have sent out mages to each of those locations already. In fact, I sent mages out to Meliban as well. You must have missed them on the way here."

"Or they were intercepted by the Khadoran patrols," frowned a mage. "Why have we not heard of the Khadoran ships before? We were supposed to own the seas. Where are they coming from?"

"Doralin's force in the Sakova lost quite a few ships to the enemy," explained Lady Mystic as she led the group up the stairs inside the temple. "The Khadorans now ride the seas in Motangan ships. That is why I needed to verify your identities when you were approaching the island. We can take nothing for granted any more."

"The temple appears empty," remarked one of the mages as Lady Mystic exited the staircase at the second level and led the group to a small room. "Where has everyone gone? There are no mages or guards."

"There is a massive festival tonight," smiled Lady Mystic as the group entered the room. "We had word this morning of Doralin's victory in the Sakova, but I will explain the news after you all learn the modifications of the air tunnel. That is too important to wait. Everyone face me," she added as she stood along the wall opposite the door.

The black cloaks gathered together and dutifully faced Lady Mystic. She was somewhat surprised that none of them questioned her restoration to grace, but then they were trained not to question Vand's fickle moods. She smiled at them.

Raise both hands high over your heads," instructed Lady Mystic, "and absolutely no talking during this process. It is a little out of the ordinary for a spell modification, but I can assure you that it works perfectly if you concentrate on my words. In fact, close your eyes and listen to my words as I walk around the room. Listen carefully for I do not wish to repeat anything."

Lady Mystic smiled broadly as the well-honed battle mages followed her instructions like little schoolchildren. She winked at Xavo when he appeared in the doorway. She continued talking as she moved away from the group of mages. Using hand signals to coordinate the timing with Xavo, she suddenly turned towards the group of mages and unleashed a light blade. Xavo also cast his own light blade, and the group of Motangan mages instantly disappeared in a mist of blood. Lady Mystic jumped backwards as blood splattered all over her. She grimaced and shook her head.

"I must learn to put more distance between me and the victims with this spell," she scowled. "Now I will have to change clothes."

"Will the bodies be discovered in here?" asked Xavo.

"You mean body parts," grinned Lady Mystic. "No. I will magically seal the room. If anyone asks, the mages came here for an important mission that cannot be discussed. They are no longer in the city, and you will refuse to talk further about them."

Chapter 23

Battle of Vandamar

Xavo and Lady Mystic sat in their secluded hideaway in the jungle, a large picnic basket between them. The cool dawn air had already begun to give way to the rising of the sun. A gust of moist tepid air suddenly blew through the clearing, and Xavo shifted uncomfortably.

"It is going to be a hot one today," he frowned. "How do you live on this jungle-infested island?"

"I have never known anything else," shrugged Lady Mystic. "It doesn't bother me."

"I long for a nice sevemore forest," countered Xavo. "The breezes are cool, and everything is not always damp."

Lady Mystic smiled thinly, but she did not respond. She sat staring at Xavo in a curious manner.

"What are you thinking about?" Xavo asked after a long moment of silence.

"Us," Lady Mystic said with a sigh. "What is going to happen to us when all of this is over? Have you thought about it?"

Xavo frowned and shook his head. "We have no future," he said softly.

"What do you mean by that?" scowled Lady Mystic. "I thought you loved me."

"I do," shrugged Xavo. "I love you with all my heart, but it is foolish to speak of such nonsense as our future. My life is already given to this struggle. You will have to find someone else in the future."

"Bah," retorted Vand's daughter. "How can you say such a thing? I will admit that our situation here is tenuous, but we can survive it. Vandamar will soon fall to the elves."

"You give the elves much credit," sighed Xavo. "While they have shown themselves to be tenacious warriors, there are still ten thousand Motangan troops in this city. Their attack on Vandamar will not be like the other battles. This will not be a case where the enemy is broken up into groups of two thousand soldiers staked out for slaughter. Santiock's men will be ready for a battle. I had hoped that his men would get drunk at the festival, but Santiock prevented that. No, Lady Mystic, this will be a bloody battle. Many will die here."

"That still doesn't mean that we will be among them," frowned

Lady Mystic. “You are so pessimistic.”

Xavo shrugged and averted his eyes. He picked up a twig and began drawing figures in the dirt. Lady Mystic looked curiously at him, her lips pressed tightly together and her eyes narrowing.

“There is something that you are not telling me,” she eventually said. “What is it?”

Xavo looked at his lover and sighed. “It is Dobuk,” he admitted. “This war cannot end with the great demon still in control. He must be destroyed. I stayed on this island with hopes of killing Vand, but he has left and is no longer approachable by me, but Dobuk remains.”

“Dobuk?” gasped Lady Mystic. “You can’t be serious? Haven’t you learned your lesson yet? You are no match for such power. You are throwing your life away. I will not permit it.”

“What is the alternative?” asked Xavo. “Even after Vand is defeated, someone must face Dobuk. If not me, to whom then does the task fall?”

Lady Mystic’s brow creased deeply as she thought about Xavo’s words. Suddenly the truth became crystal clear.

“You are trying to protect your daughter,” she said accusingly. “That is what you are up to. You think Lyra will come to confront Dobuk after Vand dies. I will not allow you to throw your life away in such a manner.”

“I must,” Xavo said softly. “I am not so foolish as to think that I can defeat Dobuk, but I can wound him. If I can stay alive long enough to cause damage to him, it may save Lyra’s life. I have had a full life, several in fact. I want her to have a future. Is that so wrong?”

“No,” Lady Mystic said as she fought back her tears. “Your heart is in the right place, but it is still foolish. While I give you credit for having survived an encounter with Dobuk, I know that you are no match for his power. You will not even damage him.”

“I must try,” Xavo declared with finality.

Lady Mystic opened her mouth to speak, but sounds of shouting interrupted her. Xavo leaped to his feet, His head swiveling to catch the sounds coming from the city.

“The elves have arrived!” he announced with urgency. “We must get to the temple.”

He extended a hand and helped Lady Mystic to her feet as horns blared throughout the city. The two mages raced along the jungle path and into the city streets. Motangan soldiers were scurrying about as they reached the temple. They ran up the steps and stopped at the front doors. Xavo caught his breath and addressed the guards.

“No one is to enter the temple for any reason,” Xavo said authoritatively. “I want guards at each of the entrances to keep everyone out.”

“The elves will never gain entry,” promised the guard.

“I did not mean just the elves,” Xavo shot back. “I said no one is to enter the temple. That includes the army. Not even General Santiock will be permitted inside. Do you understand?”

The guard shook his head and frowned in confusion. “I do not understand,” replied the soldier. “I must do what General Santiock commands.”

“General Santiock in under my command,” spat Xavo, “and I am ordering that the sanctity of the temple shall not be violated for any reason. Carry out my orders.”

The guard stiffened at the rebuke. He saluted as Xavo and Lady Mystic opened the doors and entered the temple.

“Do you think that will work?” asked Lady Mystic as she raced up the stairs behind Xavo.

“I have no idea,” admitted Xavo as he headed for the roof of the temple. “It might just slow them down. We will find out before this day is done.”

The two mages emerged on the roof of the temple. They both fought to regain their breath as they gazed out over the city. The city streets were a sea of red uniforms flowing through the narrow channels between the buildings. Dozens of red-clad bodies bled into the dirt in the open area between the city and the forest. Xavo peered into the distant forest and saw elven archers hiding behind the trees.

“Their element of surprise must not have worked,” commented Lady Mystic. “I doubt that it was their plan to surround the city and demand its surrender.”

“I also doubt it,” nodded Xavo as he saw a column of Motangans leaving the city along the shore. “Even my orders to surrender would not be accepted by Santiock unless the army was assured of defeat. The Motangans are attempting to use the strands of jungle along the coast to get around the elves. Use an air tunnel to advise the elves.”

Xavo left Lady Mystic as she wove the air tunnel. He walked around the edge of the temple roof gazing down at the Motangans as they prepared to defend the city. The battle had quickly worked to a stalemate as the elves could not safely leave the forest, and the Motangans could not cross the open area to approach their enemy. The elves had far fewer men, but their archers had greater range and accuracy. Xavo wondered what would happen next.

As Xavo was walking around the roof, he saw catapults being pushed into position by the Motangans. Large fires were lit along the city side of the open strip. He grimaced, as he understood what Santiock’s plan was. The Motangans were going to start a forest fire to engulf the hidden elves. The sevemore trees would ignite easily, and the fire would spread quickly. He had to do something to stop the

attack before it began. He rushed back to Lady Mystic and pointed towards the gathering catapults.

"We must destroy those," he said emphatically.

Lady Mystic nodded. "The elves didn't know who I was at first," she remarked. "They almost didn't believe me, but they have set up an ambush for the men traveling along the coast. What do you want to do about the catapults?"

"Force bolts would be appropriate," answered Xavo.

"You do realize that once we attack," warned Lady Mystic, "Santiock will move to kill us? There will be no further chance to manipulate him."

"I understand," replied Xavo. "Let's make good use of our time. You start at the east end of the line, and I will start at the west."

Lady Mystic moved away silently. Xavo turned and headed towards the western corner of the roof. When he was as close to the westernmost catapult as he could get, he unleashed the first of his force bolts. A surge of invisible power shot out of his fist and soared through the air. The magical spell impacted the farthest catapult with devastating results. The wooden frame of the catapult disintegrated in a fine shower of splinters. Motangan soldiers in the vicinity of the destroyed catapult fell to the ground, blood running freely from numerous punctures. Xavo ignored the sudden commotion surrounding the destruction, his eyes already moving closer to the temple as he sought out the next catapult. He unleashed another force bolt and sent it streaming towards the siege engine.

Shouts of alarm drifted up to the roof of the temple as Lady Mystic and Xavo methodically destroyed the catapults. The two mages backed slowly towards the center of the roof as they worked their way along the line of catapults. When all of the machines had been destroyed, Lady Mystic and Xavo stood back to back in the center of the roof.

"Santiock has called up the reserves," warned Lady Mystic. "A thousand soldiers from the dock area are rushing towards the temple."

"Let's meet them inside," nodded Xavo. "We can make the stairways into killing fields."

"What about the elves?" asked Lady Mystic. "They may need more help from us."

"I think we have given them more help than we realized," grinned Xavo as he pointed out to sea. "By drawing Santiock's reserves off the docks, we have cleared the way for the elven ships to land. Santiock will not even see the elves arriving before they have taken control of the docks."

Lady Mystic followed Xavo's gaze and saw scores of small ships approaching the island. They were still far enough off the island to not

be visible to anyone at ground level. She smiled and nodded as the two mages entered the temple.

Xavo led the way to the top of the nearest staircase. He leaned over the railing and saw Motangan soldiers streaming in from the front door. The soldiers split into two groups, each heading for one of the stairwells. The dark mage wasted no time in attacking. He unleashed a light blade into the thick of the Motangan ranks on the ground level. Bodies were sliced open by the magical blades of light, and the soldiers scurried towards the stairs and what they thought was safety.

Lady Mystic had already reached the opposite stairway. She looked across the atrium at the stairs climbing the wall on Xavo's side of the temple. She unleashed her own light blades at the soldiers hurrying up the stairs. Xavo could not see the results of Lady Mystic's spell as the soldiers were directly underneath him, but he smiled with satisfaction at the sound of the fresh screams. He aimed his own spells at the stairway underneath Lady Mystic.

As the two mages continued to crisscross the atrium with their spells of destruction, a river of blood began to cascade down the stairs and flow onto the floor of the atrium. The soldiers bravely continued to ascend the levels of the temple, but their numbers diminished rapidly. Out of the thousand Motangans sent to the temple, only a handful of soldiers survived the long climb to reach the top level. Those few soldiers were quickly eliminated before they could reach the mages. The temple in Vandamar suddenly succumbed to a tomblike silence.

Lady Mystic breathed heavily from the exertion of summoning up so much magic in a short period of time. She leaned against the railing to catch her breath. After just a short pause, she turned to look at Xavo, but her lover was gone. Confusion clouded her features as her eyes scanned the floor of the top level in search of Xavo. At first she was concerned that he might have succumbed to the stress of the magical battle, but fear quickly overrode her concern when she saw the doors to the throne room standing open.

Lady Mystic pushed herself away from the railing and ran to the throne room. The room was empty, but the door at the rear was also open. Pushing her fatigue aside, Vand's daughter ran through the throne room and out the back door. She charged along the corridor and around the corner to where the door to Dobuk's chamber was located. She saw Xavo's hand reaching towards the door to open it.

"No!" she screamed. "Stop!"

Xavo looked up in surprise. He saw Lady Mystic running towards him and knew that he would not succeed in opening the door before she intercepted him. He sighed in defeat as the woman plowed into

his body, knocking them both to the floor of the corridor. For several moments they remained quiet. Only heavy breathing broke the silence. Finally, Lady Mystic rolled off of Xavo and sat up.

"You will not enter that chamber without resting," Lady Mystic said softly. "You must be rested and in top physical condition. Your recent exertion must be overcome first."

"Then you do not object to my entering the chamber?" Xavo asked with confusion as he sat up.

"Of course I object," scowled Lady Mystic, "but you are pigheaded and will not listen in any event. At least rest long enough to give yourself the chance to do something useful with your life before you die."

Xavo nodded suspiciously as he stared at his lover. "I will rest a bit," he conceded, "but why do I think you are trying to trick me?"

"Perhaps because you attribute your own sneakiness to others?" shrugged Lady Mystic. "I am not responsible for your thoughts."

"Perhaps," responded Xavo, "but I doubt it. You are up to something. You may try to distract me from your true intentions, but I know that you will answer my questions truthfully. When I am rested," he asked pointedly, "will you try to stop me from entering Dobuk's chamber?"

"No," sighed Lady Mystic. "I have tried everything short of attacking you to get you to see reason, and I will not do that to you."

"Well," chuckled Xavo, "I think you actually did just attack me. Fortunately the only harm was a few bruises from falling to the floor."

Lady Mystic tried to smile at Xavo's attempt at humor, but she could not. She rose to her feet and straightened her clothes. Xavo also stood and continued staring suspiciously at his friend.

"Do not distract me by making me wonder about your motives," Xavo said softly. "I must concentrate on what I will do inside the chamber. What trick are you planning to keep me out of there?"

"I will not stop you from entering," declared Lady Mystic. "I know that your mind is made up. Forget about me and put your mind to the task."

He knew that Lady Mystic was being truthful, but Xavo was still skeptical. He was missing something, and he knew it. He continued to frown at Lady Mystic.

"Get your mind on your task," Lady Mystic said sternly. "We will have precious little time to act once we enter the chamber."

"We?" echoed Xavo as his eyes grew large with disbelief.

"We," Lady Mystic nodded determinedly. "While I may not be able to stop you from entering, you are also powerless to stop me from doing the same. If we are to die to help your daughter, we shall do so together. Now, what is your plan?"

Xavo stood silently as the extent of Lady Mystic's love became clear. His eyes teared up with the knowledge that he was throwing away something he could treasure for many years, but he also knew that Lyra could not withstand Dobuk if the demon was uninjured. He sighed with finality.

"Shields are the most important spell we will need," Xavo said. "It is vital to shield your mind from his attacks. Our bodies will quickly begin to wither and die with tormenting pain, but do not worry about it. We are assured death in the end. Dobuk can ill afford to keep us alive without Vand on the island to watch us. He will kill us. Keep your shields around your mind."

"Alright," nodded Lady Mystic, "and how do we injure him when we are concentrating on our shields?"

"I had planned to feign death," admitted Xavo, "but with two of us, there is a better option. I will verbally spar with the demon. I will taunt him with Vand's losses while you seek a crippling blow. Do not dally once we enter the chamber. Time will be limited. How are you feeling?"

"I am refreshed enough for this task," replied Lady Mystic as she approached the door to the chamber. "Let's do it."

Xavo nodded sadly and moved alongside Lady Mystic. He nodded his head exaggeratedly, and on the third nod he threw open the door and charged into the chamber. Lady Mystic raced after Xavo and came to a halt alongside him. She looked around the room, a pall of confusion distorting her features.

"I expected something more," she whispered as her eyes scanned the room. "Where is the demon?"

Xavo shook his head silently, his own eyes scanning the room with disbelief. The room was empty, devoid of furnishings or other exits. There were no mountains or vast plains. No lava flowed from towering peaks, and no sky was visible, angry or otherwise. It was simply an empty room.

"I do not understand it," Xavo said softly. "This is the right doorway."

"There are no other doorways on this level of the temple," replied Lady Mystic. "There is the throne room, the exit to the roof, and this door. This is the right doorway."

"Perhaps he is hiding," frowned Xavo. "He may have changed the look of the room to avoid detection."

"From the invading elves?" Lady Mystic shook her head. "I hardly think so. It is more likely that Dobuk has left the Island of Darkness. We have missed our chance to wound him."

"Impossible," scowled Xavo. "How could such a creature leave without our knowledge?"

“Easily,” shrugged Lady Mystic. “Even Vand left without our knowing it. Who can say what form Dobuk is capable of taking?”

“Do not harm them!” came a voice from behind the two mages.

Xavo and Lady Mystic whirled around to face the door that they had just come through. Standing before them was a large group of elves. Xavo recognized King Avalar.

“Welcome back, Avalar,” Xavo bowed slightly. “May I introduce Lady Mystic, Vand’s daughter, but an ally of the elves. I am Xavo, but I was Aakuta the last time we met.”

“I recognized the woman’s voice as the one who warned us of the Motangan flanking maneuver,” smiled the elven king. “I am pleased that the two of you have survived.”

“How did you manage to get up here?” asked Lady Mystic as she stared at the feet of the elves. “The stairs are covered in blood.”

“We came from the roof,” grinned King Avalar as he waved his men off to continue the search of the temple.

“How is the battle coming?” asked Xavo. “We saw your ships arriving before we had to come inside to battle the Motangans.”

“The battle is won,” answered the elven king. “I must thank you for the destruction of the catapults. Those engines would have cost the elves dearly. It seems that every time we meet, I incur a debt of gratitude to you,” he added with a grin.

“You owe me nothing,” smiled Xavo. “You are allies of my daughter, fighting an evil that must be fought.”

“Your daughter?” Avalar asked with confusion. “Do I know her?”

“His daughter is the Star of Sakova,” answered Lady Mystic. “What will you do now that you have conquered Motanga?”

“The island is being secured by the former slaves,” answered the elven king. “As soon as I am satisfied that the Motangans can not take it back, we are off to the mainland to help with the fight. Will you join us?”

Xavo and Lady Mystic glanced at each other with unspoken questions. Xavo smiled and returned his eyes to King Avalar.

“We will be going to the mainland,” declared Xavo, “but our answer depends on your destination.”

“Ah,” King Avalar nodded knowingly. “I am afraid that we are not heading to the Sakova. Our armies are needed elsewhere. The Chula have already taken Alamar and moved inland, so the Sakovan coastal cities are not in danger. The situation is more urgent elsewhere. If you will excuse me, I must see to my army.”

Xavo nodded pleasantly and let the elven king depart. Lady Mystic looked at her lover questioningly.

“Are you really planning on going to the Sakova?” she asked hopefully. “I was afraid that you would pursue Dobuk.”

“I must pursue him,” Xavo answered softly. “My task has not changed, but there is no need for you to leave. I did not want to mention anything to the elves until we had time to discuss it between ourselves.”

“If your task had not changed,” frowned Lady Mystic, “then why would you think that mine has? Wherever you go, Xavo, I am going with you. If you will have me,” she added questioningly.

“I think you would follow me even if prohibited it,” grinned Xavo. “As for having you, I could think of no one else I would rather have at my side. Let’s go find ourselves a boat. We have no need to wait for the elves to secure the island.”

The two mages walked out on the roof of the palace. They saw a large vine extending past the roof and walked towards it. Leaning over the edge of the roof, Xavo saw that the vine had been grown out of the ground, presumably by elven magic. He extended a hand to Lady Mystic and ushered her onto the vine. The two mages descended to the ground and made their way through the city. Just before the docks, they saw a large group of Motangan prisoners guarded by elven warriors. One of the prisoners was General Santiock. Xavo dropped Lady Mystic’s hand and approached the prisoners. Santiock saw Xavo coming and worked his way to the edge of the group of prisoners. He spat in Xavo’s direction.

“Tsk, tsk,” smiled Xavo. “That is no way for a general to act. I have something to tell you Santiock.”

“I do not need to hear anything from the lips of a traitor,” spat Santiock. “How could you do such a thing?”

“I am no traitor,” smiled Xavo. “In fact, I am not Xavo. I am Aakuta. I stole Xavo’s body from him before you rescued me. Still, I am grateful for your actions, so I will offer you some advice. The people that Vand is trying to destroy are your brothers and sisters. They are the descendents of those who fled from Vand a thousand years ago. Instead of blindly following such an evil, I beseech you to understand what is going on in this world. You are a good man at heart, and I think there is hope for you.”

“What hope?” snarled Santiock. “The elves will surely kill us.”

“After what our people have done to them,” interjected Lady Mystic, “it is understandable that you would think so, but you are wrong. The elves have no desire to kill those who wish to lay down their arms. They value life much more than Vand does. Think about it, Santiock. Your life depends upon it.”

The general’s eyes clouded in confusion. He watched Xavo and Lady Mystic turn and walk away. As their words echoed through his mind, he felt the bitterness drain from his body. He began to think about his life on Motanga, and how much he really knew about his

professed enemy.

Chapter 24

Sakovan Solution

"Have you tried Sudamar or Eldamar?" asked Premer Doralin.

"Yes," scowled Zatho. "I have tried every place that I could think of. The spell no longer works."

"You are worthless, Zatho," snapped the premer.

"How dare you speak to me that way?" retorted the Motangan mage. "Need I remind you that I report directly to the emperor? I shall report this disrespect to Vand immediately."

"You will, will you?" snarled Doralin. "And just how will you do that?"

The black cloak frowned in frustration as he glared at the premer.

"Let me make one thing perfectly clear to you, Zatho," the premer continued menacingly. "I have never cared much for mages, and I have loathed you in particular. That you were the one mage to survive the battle of the ridge is a cruel irony. You are a pompous, arrogant, little weasel of a man."

Zatho's face bulged with rage. His arms quivered, and one of them began to rise. General Valatosa swiftly drew his sword and held it to the mage's throat. Premer Doralin nodded in appreciation.

"If your finger so much as twitches in my presence again," Doralin warned venomously, "you will die a slow and painful death. You need to be reminded that your fellow mages are dead and will not come to your aid. You stand alone in the midst of eighty thousand Motangan soldiers, who like myself, detest your kind. You will remove yourself from this tent and work on your air tunnel. When you succeed in getting it to work, you will return here before transmitting any message. I no longer trust you to communicate with others outside of my command without being overseen by someone loyal to me. Get out of my sight."

Zatho was shaking with rage as he retreated from the tent. General Valatosa sheathed his sword and shook his head at the premer.

"You would have been better served to have ordered me to kill him," the general advised softly. "A mage is not the type of enemy to turn your back on. Zatho will now seek to undermine you in any way that he can."

"Zatho's kind are all the same," countered Doralin. "He would knife me in the back for lesser reasons than the ones I just gave him. I

would have let you kill him if I was not in such dire need of a mage who knows the air tunnel spell. Once I get a message out of this infernal forest, I will let you kill him."

"If he doesn't get a message off to Vand first," sighed Valatosa.

"I hope he succeeds," shrugged the premer. "No one will come to relieve me of this command without bringing food with him. If our situation does not improve by this evening, I am ordering a fallback to Alamar in the morning."

"Are you serious?" asked the general. "Vand will not like that."

"I am past the point of caring what Vand likes or dislikes," shrugged the premer. "Our men are starving, general. If we do not get food, we will lose the entire army. I prefer to retreat and take my punishment rather than watch men under my command starve to death."

"Take your punishment?" echoed the general. "You do realize what you are saying? The only punishment you will receive is death. You must know that?"

"I know," nodded Premer Doralin, "but it must be done. If we can retreat quickly to Alamar and get the men fed, we can then return here to chase the Sakovans. By the time anyone thinks of punishing me, we will have been victorious."

"Ah," the general smiled and nodded. "Now I understand. It will not be a retreat at all. We will merely be attacking to the east to make sure no Sakovans got behind us."

"Exactly," chuckled Doralin. "Zatho will have to die before we get back to Alamar. I will leave that in your hands."

The tent flap flew open and a soldier ran in. He halted before the Premer and saluted.

"There are three Sakovans at the perimeter," the soldier reported. "There are the two from yesterday and another one who claims to be the Star of Sakova."

"What does she look like?" asked the premer.

"She is quite young," reported the soldier, "clearly younger than the other two."

"Younger than the other two?" echoed Valatosa. "StarWind and the other one were not very old. If this Star of Sakova is that young, perhaps we can make this a very short meeting. She can't have much experience in negotiations."

"Perhaps," shrugged the premer. "Valatosa, you will go and verify this woman's identity. If she is indeed the Star of Sakova, bring her here for a meeting. Make sure that she arrives here safely. I have given my word. I expect it to be obeyed."

General Valatosa nodded and left the tent. The soldier was about to leave when the premer halted him.

“You are to carry word through the entire encampment,” instructed the premer. “The Sakovans who are coming here are my guests. They are not to be disturbed for any reason unless they attack first. Anyone violating this order will be handed over to the Sakovans to do with as they wish. Do you understand?”

“Perfectly,” saluted the soldier.

The soldier hurried out of the tent, and the premer hesitated only slightly before leaving the tent himself. Once outside, he began issuing orders to the soldiers and officers nearby.

“I want a bountiful meal served when I call for it,” the premer said to one officer. “Scavenge the food supplies and find the best that we have left. I want it to look like we have an overabundance of supplies. Do I make myself clear?”

“Perfectly,” nodded the officer.

The premer turned and ordered a human corridor to form along the pathway to the perimeter. He wanted the Sakovans to be impressed with the number of soldiers facing them. When he was done issuing orders, the premer turned and gazed towards the perimeter in the direction that the Sakovans would be coming from. He wanted an early view of the Star of Sakova so his reactions would not be readable when she was introduced.

Premer Doralin did not have long to wait. He saw General Valatosa leading the Sakovans through the human corridor. The premer’s eyes focused on Lyra. She was indeed young, but she did not appear to be nervous. Her eyes moved casually over the assembled soldiers without intimidation. StarWind and the tall blond Sakovan were a different matter. Their eyes scanned the crowd as if constantly expecting an attack. Their bodies were poised to act on a moment’s notice, like some carnivorous beasts ready to pounce upon some unsuspecting prey.

Premer Doralin glanced around and saw a tremendous crowd had gathered opposite his tent. It was obvious that everyone wanted to see what the Sakovan leader looked like. He dismissed the soldiers from his mind and returned his attention to the approaching Sakovans. As they approached the tent, chaos erupted.

Premer Doralin saw a flash of light out of the corner of his eye, and then everything happened at once. StarWind dove at the Star of Sakova, colliding with her and causing the two females to fall towards the ground. The tall male Sakovan pivoted to one side, his arm rising fluidly and something shiny flying from his hand. A ball of fire flew past the Sakovans, streaking through the group where the Star of Sakova should have been standing, had she not been knocked over by StarWind. The fireball struck General Valatosa in the chest, his body flying backwards to land hard on the ground.

The male Sakovan drew a long two-handed sword as StarWind leaped to her feet and did likewise. The Star of Sakova rose to her feet, and a strange blue cylinder shot skyward around her. StarWind and the male Sakovan placed their backs close to the blue cylinder and held their swords out in front of them, each guarding a different side of their leader. From somewhere in the crowd of soldiers an arrow flew at the Star of Sakova. Doralin cringed as he helplessly watched it approach, but the arrow disappeared without explanation. The whole episode took only a second or two, but the images would stay in Doralin's mind forever. He raised his hands high and shouted loudly.

"Stop!" he demanded. "These people are guests. Disperse all of you. Go back to your tents."

The Sakovans remained alert, obviously expecting more treachery to come towards them, but the crowd of soldiers started backing away. In the space the soldiers had just occupied was a body. Doralin stared at the black-cloaked form and saw a nasty metal star imbedded in the mage's forehead. Zatho's dead eyes stared skyward.

"What treachery is this?" spat StarWind as the premer came nearer. "You gave your word."

"And I meant it," Doralin replied as he gazed at General Valatosa whose chest was smoldering. "Go in the tent where you will be safe. I must see if General Valatosa is still alive."

Doralin walked over to the general's body and knelt beside it. The general groaned painfully, but he was still alive.

"I need a healer," Doralin shouted to his men. "Quickly."

Valatosa was more than a favored general to the premer. He was also Doralin's only friend. He ignored the Sakovans as he ripped the smoldering uniform from the general's chest. Unexpectedly, Doralin looked up to see the Star of Sakova kneeling opposite him. Her strange blue cylinder was gone.

"I am a mage," Lyra said softly as HawkShadow and StarWind moved to surround their leader. "I can ease his pain."

"Please do so," said Doralin. "Your male friend just killed our last mage."

"He deserved to die," scowled HawkShadow.

"Indeed he did," Doralin nodded. "I do not fault your actions. Indeed, I am impressed with your skill. What is your name?"

"I am called HawkShadow," the assassin replied.

"HawkShadow," Doralin said as he rose to a standing position, "I gave my pledge of safety, and I meant it. My orders were that anyone who attacked you would be turned over to your people to do with as you wish. I intend to keep my word. While the archer may have missed, I will have him found and delivered to you."

“He didn’t miss,” interjected StarWind. “His aim was true, but Kaltara protects the Star of Sakova. The arrow was not allowed to hurt her.”

Premer Doralin looked at StarWind as if she were crazy. He turned and walked away. He called for an officer and demanded that the archer be found. Then he walked to where Lyra had been attacked. He searched the ground for the arrow, but he could not find it. He shook his head in confusion.

“You will not find it,” a general said quietly.

“The arrow?” asked Doralin as he turned to face the general. “It has already been picked up?

“No,” explained the general. “It never landed. It simply disappeared as it passed through that blue cylinder. I have never seen anything like it.”

“Are you sure?” questioned the premer.

“I would not speak if I were unsure,” nodded the general. “I saw it with my own eyes. The shot was good, but it never struck. It simply disappeared. We are no match for such magic.”

Premer Doralin turned and left the general without replying. He saw HawkShadow sheath his sword long enough to help General Valatosa to his feet. The Star of Sakova stepped back and the blue cylinder reappeared. HawkShadow drew his sword once more and stood ready to protect his leader. Doralin walked over and gazed at Valatosa’s naked chest. It was red, but appeared unburned.

“Let us go into the tent and discuss whatever has brought you here,” Doralin suggested to Lyra.

“I cannot enter your tent,” Lyra shook her head. “My spell would destroy it.”

Doralin gazed upward at the blue cylinder that stretched skyward as far as he could see. He looked again at Valatosa’s chest and nodded. He shouted orders to bring chairs for his guests.

“Thank you for saving General Valatosa,” the premer said softly. “I will see that you are treated well when you surrender.”

“When we surrender?” echoed Lyra. “You must be joking?”

“Joking?” scowled Doralin. “That is the purpose of this meeting. What game are you playing?”

“I do not play games, Premer Doralin,” replied Lyra. “Let me explain the facts to you. You have eighty thousand men in the middle of a strange and dangerous forest. You are far from home, and your men are starving. You have no ships to leave this land, and you cannot walk across the water. We are prepared to engage you at our whim until all of you Motangans are dead. Or you could surrender now and be treated far better than I think you would treat us if we surrendered. That is the situation that you are in. You have a choice to make. What

is your decision?"

"You overstate your hand," smiled Doralin. "We outnumber you greatly, and you are mistaken about my ships. My army can come and go as we please. If you are especially good at hiding your armies, I will merely bring in more soldiers to hunt for you. It is you who must surrender."

"And where will you bring these new soldiers from?" smiled Lyra. "Are you talking about the ten thousand soldiers in Alamar who are dead? Or perhaps the ten thousand in Duran, who are also dead?"

"You are brazen in your lies," chuckled Premer Doralin. "Do not try to scare me into surrendering little girl. I have played this game much longer than you have been alive."

"Perhaps you want to try to call for the three thousand men in Teramar?" Lyra continued unfazed by the premer's remarks, "but they are as dead as the three thousand in Sudamar and the three thousand in Eldamar. And do not even think of the thirty thousand men stationed in Vandamar. They have been annihilated."

"Preposterous," scowled Premer Doralin. "You expect me to believe that the Sakovans are off conquering the world while my army chases you through the forest?"

"Not at all," replied Lyra. "The elves have taken over the Island of Darkness. They needed no help from Sakovans. The Chula took Alamar. The Khadorans took your fleet of ships, and you don't even want to hear about Duran. That city no longer exists. Ten thousand Motangans are buried under the Wall of Mermidion."

Premer Doralin stared at Lyra in disbelief.

"Surely you must have suspected something when you could no longer contact any of those cities?" smiled Lyra. "For an army that knows how to use air tunnels, you appear to be rather ignorant of how poorly the Motangan forces are faring. Vand's days of glory are at an end. You have only two choices available to you now. You can surrender, or die."

Doralin's mouth opened to speak, but General Valatosa's hand tapped his shoulder. "We need to discuss this in private," the general said softly. "Will you excuse us?"

"Certainly," nodded Lyra, "but do not delay. I am ill at ease standing alone in your camp."

Premer Doralin and General Valatosa turned and walked into the tent. The general led the premer away from the door flap.

"I think she is telling the truth," stated the general.

"And I think that fireball damaged your senses," retorted the premer. "Her story is wholly fabricated. The elves have no part in this war, and the Chula live far to the north. We must be getting close to annihilating them for her to demand our surrender."

“If her story is fabricated,” countered the general, “how is it that she happens to know the correct number of soldiers in each of those locations?”

“The Sakovans must have good spies,” shrugged Doralin. “That StarWind is certainly a capable woman. A few like her could easily supply such information.”

“Why is it that our mages were not capable of contacting any one of those cities?” pressed Valatosa.

“The Sakovans must have found a way to block the spell,” suggested Doralin. “Maybe there is something in these forests that makes the air tunnel ineffective?”

“And why have we had no food shipments from our men in Alamar?” sighed General Valatosa. “Face it, Doralin. There is a small chance that she is bluffing, but I don’t think so. What if we say no to her and march our men eastward to Alamar and find it full of Chula?”

“If we find out that her words are true,” conceded Doralin, “we will surrender at Alamar, but I cannot bring myself to believe her. Her statements are too outlandish.”

“Do you think the Sakovans are just going to let us turn around and march to Alamar?” asked the general. “We will have to fight our way back to the coast, and we will have to do so with starving men.”

“I have never known you to be so pessimistic, Valatosa,” frowned the premer. “I think that fireball has scared you. It made you realize your own mortality.”

“Perhaps,” shrugged the general, “but I have never seen a warrior move as fast as HawkShadow. He actually killed Zatho before I could get out of the way of the fireball. Think about that. These Sakovans are not running scared from us. They far outclass our army. Oh, we have more men than they do, but that has not helped us so far. They took us by surprise in the open ocean sinking scores of ships. They got our men drunk in Alamar. They poisoned our food supplies, and burned thousands of men in a forest fire. On any given night they can raid our encampment and kill three thousand men before we can counterattack. Maybe I have recognized my own mortality, but if that is what is causing me to think seriously about surrender, then I think it is a good thing. Perhaps you should consider your own mortality.”

Premer Doralin stared at his old friend in silence. He started pacing the tent. General Valatosa said nothing as he watched his friend. He knew that Doralin was a logical man. He would take in the facts he could prove and evaluate them, and then he would dwell upon the rumors and apply them carefully. Valatosa was confident that the premer would come to the same conclusion that he had.

“We have too few actual facts,” Premer Doralin said as he stopped pacing. “I agree that your thoughts are logical, but you give too much

weight to suppositions. I cannot surrender without some proof of these wild claims. Come with me."

General Valatosa followed the premer out of the tent. Doralin returned to the Sakovans who had ignored the chairs brought to them. They still stood where the general had fallen.

"Can you prove your claims?" Doralin asked the Star of Sakova. "Can you prove that Duran no longer exists, or that Alamar is inhabited by Chula?"

"I can speak to the Chula in Alamar," frowned Lyra, "but that will prove nothing to you. You will claim that my air tunnel could be going somewhere else."

"Quite true," nodded the premer. "The only solution is for my army to return to Alamar and see for ourselves. If Alamar is truly in Chula hands and my ships are gone, I will surrender to you there."

"I am afraid that I cannot allow that to happen," Lyra shook her head.

"You will have to," countered Premer Doralin. "You have offered no proof to demand my surrender."

"I don't have to do anything, Premer Doralin," Lyra said sternly. "If you do not accept my terms for your surrender, we will crush your army. We will attack you every day, and we will raid you every night. You may have eighty thousand men right now, but I promise you that by the time you reach Alamar, you will only need a very small boat to return to Motanga."

"And you will be destroyed upon reaching the Island of Darkness," added StarWind. "Should any of you make it that far."

"What about contacting someone on the Island of Darkness that the premer knows?" suggested HawkShadow. "There must be someone there who survived that Doralin would know."

"An excellent idea," General Valatosa nodded approvingly. "Almost any of the troops left in Teramar would know the premer or myself."

"Teramar is not much of an option," frowned Lyra. "The troops there refused to surrender. They were all killed. There were many prisoners taken in Sudamar. Would that be sufficient?"

"All killed?" balked Doralin. "That is hard to believe. No, Sudamar is not acceptable. That city is under Premer Shamal."

"What about Vandamar?" asked General Valatosa. "Surely people survived there?"

"Some," frowned Lyra as her blue cylinder winked out. "I will contact them and find out which officers survived."

Premer Doralin looked curiously at the Star of Sakova and wondered why she dropped her protection spell. He was soon distracted by Lyra's conversation as she talked to someone through the

air tunnel. He wondered if she would try some ruse to trick him. He listened intently to the names being mentioned by the person on the other end of the air tunnel. He recognized none of them.

"Wait," interrupted General Valatosa. "Did you say Santiock? You know Santiock don't you, Doralin?"

The premer nodded, and Lyra requested that Santiock be brought to the air tunnel.

"Do not say anything to Santiock," warned the premer. "For me to believe you, I must be sure that the man is not being coached."

Lyra nodded and a few moments later Santiock's voice came through the air tunnel.

"Who am I speaking to?" asked Santiock.

"This is Premer Doralin," declared the premer. "General Valatosa is by my side. Where are you standing right now?"

"On the roof of the temple," answered Santiock. "How is it that you are speaking to the elves? Have you joined them as well?"

"As well?" frowned the premer. "What do you mean?"

"Xavo and Lady Mystic deserted," answered Santiock. "They helped the elves defeat us."

"Defeat you?" questioned the premer. "What do you mean? Are you in Vandamar?"

"Where else would I be?" quipped Santiock. "What is going on here? How is it that you are talking to the elves and do not know about the fall of the island? Is this some kind of trick?"

"No trick, Santiock," sighed the premer. "The Sakovans are asking for our surrender. They told me that Motanga has fallen, but I didn't believe them. Is the whole island under the control of the elves?"

"All of it," confirmed Santiock. "They attacked the southern cities first. Our armies were tricked into meeting them in the center of the island. Only my army remained in Vandamar. We could not hold out against the elves. Are you going to surrender?"

"Break the connection," Doralin said softly to Lyra.

Lyra nodded and dropped the air tunnel. "I trust you are now assured that my words were the truth?"

"I am," nodded Doralin. "How will my men be treated? What will happen to them?"

"Your men will be well cared for," answered the Star of Sakova. "We will immediately bring in wagons of food. Your men will be required to give up their weapons. We cannot take the chance that you might change your mind."

"Understandable," agreed the premer. "Then what?"

"Your army will be escorted to Alamar," explained Lyra. "They will be put to work restoring the city that they destroyed. When the war is over, your men will be set free and reunited with their families.

I imagine that some will want to return to Motanga, but others will be welcome to stay here. These are details to be discussed later, but I plan to treat your men fairly and kindly. There has been enough suffering."

"Your terms are generous," smiled Premer Doralin. "More generous than mine would have been. I accept."

Chapter 25

The Third Trench

Emperor Vand bowed low and backed out of the special room in the temple at Vandegar. He hesitated for a moment at the doorway as his eyes roved over the magnificent vista of towering volcanoes. A strong odor of sulfur filled the air, and loud crackling sounds emanated from one of the lava flows. He cast his eyes at the great demon one last time before turning and exiting the room.

Vand strode purposefully from the special room to the throne room of the temple. A dozen black-cloaked mages milled about the room in quiet conversation. They fell to silence as the emperor entered. Vand walked to his throne, which was flanked by six black demons, their stony faces masks of hatred.

"Get me Tzargo," demanded the emperor.

One of the mages slipped out of the room and returned shortly with the head premer. Tzargo walked towards the throne and fell to one knee, his head bowed in reverence.

"Rise," commanded the emperor. "Tell me what is happening with the invasions."

Premer Tzargo rose and stared at the emperor. He dared not let his eyes wander to the faces of the demons for it was said that such a single glance invited a most horrible death.

"There has been little word from the Sakova," reported the premer, "but the war in Khadora is going well, although slower than we expected. Here in Fakara, Cardijja's men are following the Meliban River to the east. They have not yet encountered any opposition."

"Such a rosy picture you paint," sneered the emperor. "Why has there been no word from the Sakova?"

Tzargo's left eye twitched at hearing the emperor's words and the tone in which they were uttered. Something unpleasant was about to arrive. The premer hoped that the emperor's wrath could be deflected onto someone other than himself.

"I am not sure what Doralin is up to," reported Tzargo. "In violation of his orders, he has failed to report in regularly. I would like permission to replace him. He has become undependable."

"Is Doralin alone in his failure to report?" asked the emperor, ignoring Tzargo's request to replace the Premer of Teramar.

"No," Tzargo replied nervously. "There are some major problems with the air tunnel spell. While we have regular reports from Premer

Shamal and Premer Cardijja, we have been unable to contact Premer Doralin or any city on Motanga. Cardijja recently sent three ships to Vandamar in an attempt to discover the problem with the spell, but he has lost contact with them. He also sent ships to Duran for supplies, but the ships returned empty. They have been unable to even locate the city."

"You are failing me, Tzargo," scowled the emperor. "You hold a prestigious position that many would kill to obtain. The enemy is making inroads on my empire, and you are totally unaware of it. Why is this?"

Premer Tzargo's hands began trembling, and he quickly clasped them behind his back. Sweat began to form on his brow.

"I am not aware of any enemy successes," Premer Tzargo said softly. "I have our mages working on the problems with the air tunnel, but they seem to be incapable of discovering its flaw."

"There is no flaw in the air tunnel spell," declared Vand. "Have you even considered the ramifications of that?"

"But," frowned Tzargo, "that makes no sense. Why can't the mages contact anyone then? Do you suspect that our mages are duplicitous?"

"Hardly," sneered the emperor. "I expected better from you, Tzargo. You disappoint me greatly."

"I apologize for my failings," replied the premer. "My devotion to you has never wavered. Whatever my failings, I vow to correct them immediately. Tell me what must be done to please you."

Emperor Vand glared at the premer for a long time. The room was absolutely silent as no one dared to draw attention to himself. When the emperor finally spoke, it was like the loud crack of a whip breaking the silence.

"Doralin has left the war," the emperor spat. "He allowed his forces to be bested by a mere girl. Alamar has fallen, and Duran no longer exists. The elves have infested the Island of Darkness, led by the elven king your men allowed to escape from the prison he was assigned to. Explain to me how you have not failed me."

Premer Tzargo's mind whirled with the emperor's words. Suddenly the real reason for the failure of communications became clear. A third of the Motangan army was gone, and there was no longer a source for precious supplies. The burning of the fields in Khadora suddenly took on a more ominous meaning than the mere elimination of spoils.

"As I thought," scowled the emperor. "You have no excuse. I am changing your invasion plans, Tzargo."

"Of course," nodded the premer. "What will you have me do?"

"I want Shamal's forces to move quickly to lay waste to Khadora,"

explained Vand. “I want Sintula, Chantise, and Khadoratung totally destroyed, and I want it done now.”

“Shamal’s men are currently advancing on the third trench,” reported the premer. “Once they get past that obstacle, they will be upon Sintula quickly. Chantise and Khadoratung will be crushed soon.”

“That is not soon enough for my liking,” retorted the emperor. “Abandon your slow and cautious route. Use the mages to destroy the third trench instead of slowly trying to overwhelm the enemy.”

“Such methods will be costly,” Tzargo warned as he felt a measure of relief over the change in topic. Battle strategy was something he felt at ease discussing. “Using the mages so early in the battle will put them in harm’s way.”

“Then they must cast their spells quickly,” shrugged the emperor. “Whatever their losses, I want those armies here in Fakara. Crush Khadoratung and the country will be ruined. We can return later to mop up the fragments of their civilization.”

“You want Shamal’s force here in Fakara?” puzzled the premer. “Cardijja has faced little opposition after the initial surprise attack. He hardly needs more men to find and defeat the Fakarans”

“Cardijja is to stop searching for the Fakarans,” stated Vand. “The key to our victory now rests in destroying Angragar. Cardijja is to continue eastward to the coast. He will find the ancient city and destroy it totally. Shamal’s forces will search western Fakara after he crushes Khadoratung. Between the two armies, we will find the capital of our enemy. When Angragar is reduced to rubble, all opposition against us will cease.”

“I understand,” Tzargo nodded. “Should I make plans for the retaking of the Island of Darkness?”

“That is unnecessary,” Vand shook his head. “My time of exile is over. Vandegar will become the center of the world once again. Find Angragar, Premer Tzargo. Find it and destroy it. Your life depends upon it.”

With a wave of the emperor’s hand, Premer Tzargo was dismissed.

* * *

Marshal Berman stood on a ridge with a good view of the third trench. He watched as the Motangan archers pressed forward to the edge of the ridge and knew that the time to start an orderly retreat had arrived. He was disappointed that the enemy army had advanced so quickly, and he knew that before the day was done, the first elements of the Motangans would be across the trench. He called for a mage. The woman came forward without delay to receive instructions.

“Have the mages begin retreating,” ordered the marshal. “Inform

the infantry to prepare to follow the mages. Make sure that they know that they are not to cross the rivers until they reach the city. The only bridges left standing over the rivers are at Sintula. Also," he continued, "make sure that the cavalry commanders are informed of what we are doing. This will be a major battle for them, as the retreat to Sintula will be much longer than the other retreats."

The mage nodded and began issuing commands through her air tunnel. Marshal Berman turned and saw the commotion to his rear. He nodded in satisfaction that the retreat was beginning. When he turned his attention back to the trench he was surprised to see the enemy archers retreating. His brow crinkled in thought as he wondered what the Motangans were up to.

"Belay those orders," Marshal Berman said to the air mage. "Something is different with the Motangan approach to this trench. I wonder what they are up to."

The Khadoran marshal watched with curiosity as the Motangan archers drew back. He subconsciously heard the air mage sending the messages out, but he tuned them out as he watched the battle cease. The Khadoran archers were left with no targets to aim at, as the Motangans pulled back out of range. Unexpectedly, a large swarm of black cloaks appeared at the vanguard of the Motangans.

"What they are up to is magic," said a female voice beside him.

Marshal Berman glanced to his left to see who was talking. He saw an elderly woman, but not the air mage that he had just given directions to.

"You should remain with the rest of the mages," cautioned Marshal Berman. "This is too dangerous a location for you unless you are called for."

The old mage ignored the marshal and wove an air tunnel. He frowned at her as she began issuing orders to the mages. He listened as she ordered the mages to advance to the front lines.

"What are you doing?" snapped Marshal Berman. "I do not want our mages in harm's way. Cancel those orders, or I shall have you removed from this ridge."

"I am doing what the Torak has commanded," the woman replied, unafraid of the marshal's wrath. "I am Glenda. We are about to be attacked magically. I strongly advise you to withdraw your archers immediately. The area around the trench is about to become a magical killing field."

Marshal Berman immediately turned to the other air mage who had been handling the orders to retreat. He marched towards her in a sour mood.

"I want to contact the emperor immediately, " he snapped. "Find out who this Glenda is and if he has issued orders to her to

countermand my commands."

"Glenda is the emperor's mother," the air mage said softly as she wove an air tunnel to Sintula. "She is in command of the mages."

Marshal Berman frowned as he heard the air mage request the emperor. Marak's voice came through a moment later.

"What is happening?" asked the Torak.

"I am not sure," admitted Marshal Berman. "Motangan mages are coming forward. A woman mage is issuing orders that countermand my own. I understand that she is your mother. Is this true?"

"My mother is called Glenda," answered the Torak. "If she is issuing orders, obey them. She must think a magical attack is coming or she would not have said anything."

"Why was I not informed of being replaced?" asked the marshal.

"You have not been replaced, Marshal Berman," replied the Torak. "I have complete faith in you. Glenda was told to watch for magical attacks and move quickly to counteract them. She has my complete faith. Listen to her and work with her. She will relinquish command when the magical nature of the attack is over."

"But she is ordering the mages to the front lines," protested Berman. "Many of them will be killed."

"That may be so," conceded the emperor, "but Glenda would not act unless your troops are in dire danger. Her instructions were to intervene only in the case of an emergency. I suspect the third trench is about to fall, and fall in a disastrous way. Prepare for a swift retreat."

The air tunnel was dropped at the emperor's end. Marshal Berman stood fuming for a few seconds before ordering the air mage to follow him. He returned to stand at Glenda's side.

"I am sorry for this," Glenda said softly, "but magical warfare is something your men are not prepared for."

"What are the Motangans going to do?" asked the marshal.

"I am not sure," admitted Glenda, "but Premer Shamal has gone to great lengths to protect his mages, as you have. Now he is sending them forward. It is an ominous move. I strongly suggest that you withdraw your men from the trench. Do not let them remain where the enemy expects them to be. We do not know the power of Motangan mages."

"But our mages will be decimated without my archers," objected the marshal.

"Our mages are warriors just like your men, Marshal," countered Glenda. "They will not expose themselves to unnecessary harm, but they will fight to the death for Khadora. Withdraw your archers quickly."

Marshal Berman stared at the approaching black cloaks for a

moment before nodding and turning to the other air mage.

"Order the archers to retreat five hundred paces," he ordered. "Have the infantry move forward and use shields to protect the archers. Get our cavalry commanders to move to the sidelines and prepare to charge towards the center in front of the infantry in case of a breaching of the trench."

The air mage nodded and began to issue orders through her air tunnel. Marshal Berman watched his entire army burst into motion. The archers moved back, and the infantry moved forward. The mages moved past them all to become the front lines of the Khadoran army. The Motangan black cloaks continued to advance. They eventually halted at a point that was just outside the range of the archers.

"If we call the archers forward," Marshal Berman said softly to Glenda, "we could strike a few of them down before they retreated."

"Not yet," Glenda shook her head. "I fear the trench will soon become a death zone. We must wait for the black cloaks to commit themselves. Once they are into their spell casting, our mages will attack. You may want to bring the archers forward at that time, but I am not sure."

Marshal Berman nodded as his fury at being overridden by Glenda began to fade. He watched the enemy with curiosity as forces on both sides of the trench moved to follow orders. He wondered what had changed the Motangan approach to crossing the trenches.

Unexpectedly, the ground became to tremble. Marshal Berman gazed at the black cloaks as they raised their arms and brought them down again. Each reiteration caused the ground to rumble with more ferocity. Within moments the trench began to crumble. Large rocks broke out of the earth and vibrated towards the trench. Loose dirt flowed like rivers from both sides of the trench towards the gaping gash in the surface of the ground.

"They are causing the trench to be filled!" Marshal Berman shouted with alarm as he watched boulders unearthed and sent rolling towards the trench.

"Very clever," nodded Glenda. "The Motangans could then rush across the land where the trench once existed and rout our troops. I have other ideas."

Glenda issued terse commands into an air tunnel and then returned to watching the drama unfold. Marshal Berman looked questioningly at the emperor's mother, but she did not notice, her gaze intent on watching the black cloaks.

"How can you stop this?" Marshal Berman asked as the ground began to vibrate so severely that the horses were becoming spooked.

"Patience," Glenda replied softly. "We must let the Motangans continue to the point where they dare not leave the job unfinished. If

we attacked now, the black cloaks would merely retreat. If we wait until their success is only a moment away, they will try to weather our attack to finish the task at hand. That is when they will die."

The ground rumbled more severely, and Marshal Berman saw his men struggling to maintain their balance. The trench was rapidly being filled by the debris flowing towards it. He was about to open his mouth to protest Glenda's delay when he noticed that something was different. While the rocks were still rolling rapidly towards the trench on the Khadoran side, the debris on the Motangan side was slowing down.

"Now you will witness why our mages have been kept near the front lines," smiled Glenda. "It was just for a moment like this."

Suddenly the air was filled with rocks and dirt. Everything that had been rolling towards the trench became suddenly airborne. Pebbles and boulders alike flew towards the black cloaks with amazing speed. The debris slammed into the casting Motangan mages with a deadly velocity. Bodies were broken like rag dolls and tossed to the ground to slide backwards into the Motangan army. The black cloaks who survived the initial impact worked feverishly to complete the collapsing of the trench, but a second wave of rocks was already heading towards them. A cloud of dust rose over the Motangan side of the nearly filled trench, blocking the marshal's view of the black cloaks. Glenda ordered another wave of missiles to be sent towards the Motangans and then turned to Marshal Berman.

"I think you should order the retreat now," Glenda said. "I will keep a few mages here to delay the Motangans. It will be a while before they can see clearly, so I doubt that they will charge towards us, but they will have an easy time crossing the trench when they do come. You will need a good head start to reach the bridges at Sintula."

"You are an amazing woman, Glenda," smiled Marshal Berman. "I am sorry for doubting you."

"Your doubts were understandable, Marshal," smiled Glenda. "I discussed Marak's desire to keep our role secret, but I think his decision was wise in the end. We had no idea what the black cloaks would try, so there was no definitive plan for us. I am sorry that you were kept in the dark."

"I am concerned about some of your mages staying while the rest of us retreat," replied Marshal Berman. "I do not like abandoning them."

"Leave us a dozen horses," Glenda said. "We will keep the air thick with dust and send a few volleys of rocks into it to keep the Motangans cautious. When one of them sticks his head out to see what is going on, we will mount up and ride like the wind. Your cavalry will swallow us up and protect us."

“So you will be one of those staying?” frowned the marshal. “I would not like the emperor to hold me accountable for his mother’s death or injury.”

“Put your mind at ease, Marshal,” replied Glenda. “I was chosen for this position by my fellow mages, not my son. My decisions are my responsibility, not yours. Go quickly. I am not sure how long we can hold the trench.”

* * *

“Marshal Berman’s forces are heading towards the city,” the Torak announced to the Lords’ Council. “It is time to ready your armies. The battle for Sintula will commence in a couple of days.”

“So soon?” frowned Lord Patel. “I though we would have a few more days before the trenches were compromised.”

“Things are happening quickly around the world,” the Torak responded. “Lyra has accepted the surrender of Premer Doralin. The war in the Sakova has ended.”

“Fantastic,” grinned Lord Chenowith. “Will the Sakovans be coming to help us in Khadora?”

“That is not practical,” the Torak shook his head. “By the time the Sakovans get here, this war will be decided one way or the other. Besides, they have eighty thousand Motangans to accommodate. They cannot leave that many of the enemy alone in the Sakova. The Island of Darkness has also fallen.”

“The elves?” asked Lord Patel.

“Yes,” nodded Emperor Marak. “King Avalar’s people have taken all four cities on the island. They have also freed thousands of slaves, both human and elven. Now it is our turn to halt the Motangans.”

“Or at least slow them down,” stated Lord Kiamesh.

“We will do the best we can,” replied the Torak, “but Sintula is an important battle for us. If the Motangans reach Chantise, Khadora is doomed.”

“Why?” asked Lord Jamarat. “Khadoratung is the capital. We should not admit defeat before the Imperial Valley is lost.”

“If the Motangans cross the river at Chantise,” explained the Torak, “they will be unbeatable. Here at Sintula we have them penned in by the convergence of the two major rivers. They will lose many men trying to cross the rivers. Between Sintula and Chantise they will be boxed in between the Three Sisters and the Bear Mountains, but once they cross the river at Chantise, we can no longer constrain them. They can march down the entire width of the Imperial Valley and we will be helpless to stop them.”

“So you are saying that we only have two chances to destroy the Motangans?” asked Lord Quilo.

“Here at Sintula,” nodded the emperor, “and again between here

and Chantise. Those are the only two places that we can achieve victory. We cannot survive if we are forced to face the full breadth of the Motangan army."

"Then we will halt them here at Sintula," Lord Faliman said confidently.

"Hopefully," frowned the emperor, "but let's not get overconfident. I want the evacuation of Sintula started immediately. Use every boat and barge in the city. I want none of them left for the enemy."

"What about using the barges for our troops if we have to evacuate?" asked Lord Patel.

"They will not be needed for our troops," Marak shook his head. "We will retreat slowly by land."

"Slowly?" frowned Lord Kiamesh. "You want the Motangans to follow us?"

"Most definitely," grinned Emperor Marak. "I do not think we can possibly save Sintula from the Motangan hordes, but I think we can defeat them before they reach Chantise. I have several surprises in store for them."

"Are you keeping these surprises from us?" frowned Lord Chenowith. "I thought we were trusted."

"You are all trusted," replied Emperor Marak. "My plans will not be kept from you, but I am still refining them. Let me tell you what I have in mind. Perhaps you will have some ideas to make the trap even better. Lord Faliman, start the evacuation of citizens from Sintula. As soon as you return, we will discuss our plans for the Three Sisters."

Chapter 26

The Need for Spies

The men gathered in a large rectangular room in the palace at Angragar. Maps and charts were spread over the large table and tensions were high.

“Why would the Motangans pass up a chance to pursue our warriors?” asked Yojji, leader of the Kheri tribe. “They have chased us every time in the past.”

“Maybe they are getting wise?” suggested Adger, leader of the Mutang tribe. “It does not take much more intelligence than that of a wasooki to learn that they lose men each time they chase us.”

“I don’t know the reason,” sighed Blaka, leader of the Extala tribe. “I am only reporting what I have observed. The last half dozen attempts at luring the Motangans away from their march have failed. Oh, they defended themselves, but they showed no interest in chasing us. When we retreated, they continued following the north branch of the Meliban River.”

“Almost as if they knew their destination?” frowned Bakhai. “Is that what you are saying?”

“That is certainly one reason to explain such behavior,” shrugged Blaka, “but I have no way of knowing for sure.”

“Must you draw them away from the river to attack them?” asked Bakhai.

“Our men are horsemen,” interjected Wyant, the sheriff of Fakara. “Our method of fighting is to sweep down on the enemy in large numbers and smash the defenders. We leave just as quickly. Fakarans are no match for the Motangans if we dismount and hide behind trees. We need the enemy in the open.”

“Yet not so open that they can see us coming,” nodded Rejji. “Our best fighting so far has been at night when their visibility is limited, but those days are over. To defeat the Motangans in the forests and mountains, we must adapt new tactics.”

“New tactics?” balked Yojji. “You expect the tribes to change the way we have fought for a thousand years?”

“If you want to survive,” Rejji spoke slowly and clearly, “yes. The tribes developed their method of fighting because it suited the terrain. The enemy is no longer on the plains. They are in thick forests, and soon they will be climbing the mountains.”

“Until they descend out of the mountains on this side,” Adger

pointed out. “Then they will be back in our kind of terrain.”

“True,” nodded Wyant, “but do you want to face two hundred and fifty thousand Motangans so close to Angragar? They must never be allowed to attack this city.”

“Wyant is correct,” agreed Rejji. “That many Motangans that close to Angragar is a disaster for us. We need to cut down their numbers before they cross the mountains.”

“What about the Valley of Bones?” asked Mobi, a Qubari tribesman “It was used effectively against Grulak and his men.”

“The Valley of Bones is not large enough to accommodate the Motangan army,” Wyant shook his head. “We trapped twenty thousand of Grulak’s men and caused the others to throw down their weapons and go home. The Motangans will not throw down their weapons and leave.”

“They mean to kill all of us,” agreed Rejji. “We can use the Valley of Bones to trim some of their numbers, but not significantly. Cardijja can afford to throw away twenty thousand men while Grulak could not.”

The room fell silent for a moment as the leaders of the free tribes tried to think of a way to battle the Motangans effectively. Yltar, the head shaman of the Qubari people eased his way to the table and stared at the map.

“We are neglecting the most important questions of all,” Yltar said softly. “Where are the Motangans heading, and how did they learn of their destination?”

“You think they are heading for Angragar?” questioned Rejji.

“They could just be following the river,” shrugged Yltar, “but then why not engage Fakarans where they found them? I believe they have a destination in mind and are anxious to reach it.”

“The only destination that would interest them is Angragar,” frowned Wyant.

“Then how did they learn of its location?” prompted Yltar.

“Why is that important?” puzzled Yojji. “If they know the location of Angragar, who cares how they found out?”

“Because Yltar thinks that they do not really know the location,” interjected Bakhai.

The shaman turned and grinned at the Astor’s brother. “You will make a fine Head Shaman one day,” he said to Bakhai. “You understand the importance of questioning all things.”

“Let me be the first to admit,” frowned Wyant, “that I have no idea what you two are talking about. Explain it so that Fakaran tribesmen can understand.”

“Let’s suppose that Cardijja thinks he knows where Angragar is,” explained Yltar. “He is moving his massive army as fast as he can

towards that goal. He ignores the prods and jabs we inflict on his forces and continues to press onward."

"That pretty much explains the behavior of his army right now," nodded Blaka.

"Now let's suppose that Cardijja's information is wrong," smiled the shaman. "Or maybe the information is merely too generalized to actually help him find his goal. Perhaps he knows that Angragar is somewhere east of the mountains and he is pushing to cross them before he engages us."

"Are you saying that we can still mislead him after he crosses the mountains?" asked Rejji.

"Perhaps," shrugged Yltar. "That depends upon where Cardijja received his information. If he only knows the general location of Angragar, he will once again actively engage the tribes after he crosses the mountains. He will try to chase them to see which way they go."

"That could work to our advantage," brightened Yojji. "We would have his armies between us and the mountains. That is a fight that the tribes would welcome."

"Unless he truly knows where Angragar is," frowned Rejji. "We cannot afford to wait to find out where he is heading."

"Correct," nodded Yltar. "Which is why we must find out what Cardijja knows."

"And how are we going to find that out?" scowled Blaka. "Do we just send one of us down to ask him?"

The Qubari shaman did not answer. He turned and stared at Bakhai. Bakhai's eyes opened wide in confusion as the shaman stared at him, but he finally understood what was expected of him. He inhaled deeply and nodded.

"I will go," Bakhai announced.

The leaders of the free tribes gasped at Bakhai's offer, but Rejji walked over to his brother and put his arm around him.

"I will send somebody with you," whispered Rejji. "Do nothing foolish, but find out where Cardijja is heading."

* * *

Lady Mystic and Xavo entered the harbor of Meliban. Motangan soldiers immediately began to converge on the docks with a few black cloaks taking the lead. Lady Mystic hastily wove an air tunnel and directed it towards the black cloaks. She announced who they were and nothing more before dropping the air tunnel. When they approached the dock, a soldier threw them a line and helped tie the boat to the dock. Xavo helped Lady Mystic out of the boat and then stepped to the dock himself.

"What are you two doing here?" questioned one of the black

cloaks. “Where have you come from?”

“We have come from Motanga,” Lady Mystic answered. “As to what we are doing here, that is none of your business. Where is Premer Cardijja?”

“We will ask the questions,” retorted the Motangan mage. “We were informed that the elves have taken over the Island of Darkness. How is it that you two have managed to leave?”

“You are rather well informed,” frowned Xavo. “We managed to escape while Vandamar was falling. As for who is asking the questions here,” he continued with scorn, “I am a disciple of Vand. As such, I will not tolerate your attitude. What is your name?”

“I am Veritago,” the mage’s chest swelled with pride. “I am in charge of Meliban.”

“Good,” Xavo nodded curtly, “then you can escort us to our quarters. We are tired and hungry and in need of bathing.”

“First I must inform Vandegar of your presence here,” balked Veritago. “We have been instructed to inform the emperor of any significant developments.”

“You will do nothing of the kind,” scowled Lady Mystic. “Using an air tunnel over such a great distance can be disastrous. Have you not been informed of the dangers?”

“Dangers?” the mage echoed suspiciously. “We use the air tunnel all the time. What nonsense are you spouting?”

“It is obvious that the twelve mages from here never returned,” Xavo said softly to his partner. “This is most serious.”

Veritago’s eyes narrowed as he watched the two newcomers talk privately. While Xavo’s voice had been lowered to almost a whisper, the Motangan mage could hear them perfectly well.

“That explains much about their ignorance,” Lady Mystic nodded to Xavo. Raising her voice to a normal volume, she turned to gaze into Veritago’s eyes. “You will contact no one until we have talked,” she said authoritatively. “There are dangers that you are obviously unaware of. Lead the way.”

Veritago frowned with skepticism, but he turned and led the way to the Kheri Inn just across the street from the administration building. He loudly ordered two rooms for the visitors.

“Have two baths drawn,” added Xavo. “I will discuss developments with you while I bathe. There is too much danger for the news to wait too long.”

Veritago passed the order on to the Motangan innkeeper and followed Xavo up the stairs. Neither of them spoke as Xavo undressed and a soldier filled a tub with hot water. When the soldier was gone, Xavo stepped into the tub and began to wash away the salt spray encrusting his body.

“Many things have happened in the past few days, Veritago,” Xavo began. “Rather than bore you with what I know, tell me what you have been informed of. I will then fill the gaps in your knowledge.”

The black cloak hesitated, but Xavo appeared so at ease that he could not imagine any subterfuge. He mentioned the most important news that he had already heard. It included the loss of Duran, the defeat of Doralin, the fall of Motanga, and Vand’s instructions to Cardijja to find Angragar.

“You are fairly well informed,” Xavo nodded when Veritago had concluded. “What is missing from your knowledge is the corruption of the air tunnel spell. While it is still useful for short distances, it is extremely unwise to use it over any great distance. The elves have found a way to spread a compulsion spell through any air tunnel that they can detect. We advised the twelve mages sent to Vandamar about this problem and sent them back here. I am concerned that they never arrived.”

“A compulsion spell?” echoed Veritago. “How does that affect us? There are no elves in Fakara.”

“There you are wrong,” Xavo shook his head. “There are elven mages attached to each of our enemies’ armies. Did you not know that the elven princesses actually were raised here on the mainland?”

“I had heard that,” nodded Veritago, “but I thought they had fled to Elvangar.”

“Fled?” balked Xavo. “One can hardly accuse them of fleeing when they have just recently conquered the Island of Darkness.”

“Maybe so,” replied Veritago, skepticism still evident in his voice, “but we are still under orders to inform Vand of any major happenings.”

“Then you must do so,” shrugged Xavo as he watched the mage’s demeanor soften.

“Then I will do so immediately,” declared Veritago as he rose and turned to leave the room.

“You are going yourself?” Xavo said with shock. “I cannot imagine that you would not send someone else. Who will be in charge of Meliban while you are away?”

“Away?” questioned Veritago. “What do you mean away?”

“Well,” Xavo shook his head in confusion, “I just explained why you must not use an air tunnel over such a great distance. Word of our arrival must be sent to Vand the old-fashioned way. Someone will have to go to Vandegar. I did not think that you would actually go yourself.”

“Travel to Vandegar?” balked the mage. “You can’t be serious? Do you know how far that is?”

“I have been there,” smiled Xavo. “It is an impressive temple, much larger than the one in Vandamar.”

“You have been to Vandegar?” Veritago asked with suspicion. He knew that Xavo had not been to the mainland since the invasion began. “Before the invasion?”

“Quite a bit before the invasion,” nodded Xavo. “You seem surprised. Did you think that one became a disciple of Vand merely for being a good mage? I have served Vand in many ways, most of which you will never hear about.”

“I was unaware,” replied Veritago with genuine awe. Only spies and assassins had been allowed to leave the Island of Darkness before the invasion. The mage suddenly had a newfound level of respect for Xavo. The revelation lent great credibility to Xavo’s knowledge and words.

“I suggest that you send a man of lesser importance than yourself,” smiled Xavo, feeling that he had finally set the hook. “Or you could just let Lady Mystic and me deliver the news. We are heading for Vandegar in the morning.”

“You are going to Vandegar?” inquired Veritago. “The trip is not safe. Cardijja lost fifty thousand men getting the emperor to Vandegar, and I cannot afford to offer you troops. Our soldiers are needed to guard the caravans going to Premer Cardijja.”

“We will not need troops to escort us,” Xavo waved off the suggestion. “It is important that the emperor get news of this air tunnel danger. Somebody must deliver the word, and it is important enough that I feel a personal need to do it.”

“And what should I do when Vandegar contacts me?” frowned Veritago. “They do so on a daily basis.”

“Do not answer the calls,” warned Xavo as he stepped from the tub and began drying himself. “While they may get angry with you right now, I will explain the situation when I arrive in Vandegar. The danger of someone in Vandegar falling under an elven compulsion spell is too severe to be taken lightly.”

* * *

Xavo and Lady Mystic rode out of Meliban early in the morning. They did not speak until they were well away from the city.

“It has been a long time since I rode,” commented Lady Mystic, “and even that was just for sport. How far is Vandegar?”

“It doesn’t matter,” shrugged Xavo, “we are not going there. For either of us to show our faces at Vandegar would be suicide right now.”

“Then what are we doing in Fakara?” scowled Lady Mystic. “I would have preferred to stay on the island over this despicable wasteland.”

“We will go to Vandegar eventually,” soothed Xavo, “but we cannot just yet. Vand must be desperate for allies before we attempt to show our faces there. In the meantime, we will do our best to make him desperate.”

“And how do we do that?” asked Lady Mystic. “By stealing two of his precious horses?”

“I didn’t steal them,” grinned Xavo. “Veritago freely offered them. I think he was relieved that we had offered to go to Vandegar so that he didn’t have to sacrifice any of his men.”

“I am sure,” chuckled Lady Mystic. “And just what did you tell him last night? His attitude changed dramatically.”

“That is not important,” shrugged Xavo. “What is important is the level of supplies present in Meliban. I thought there would be much less than what I saw walking around the city last night. Cardijja has been wise in loading up on supplies and not depending on regular shipments from Duran.”

“Yet he had sent ships to Duran for more supplies,” Lady Mystic pointed out. “Why if he was not in need of them?”

“Need is relative,” replied Xavo. “When you have three major armies drawing on the same supply depot, a wise man anticipates shortages. I think Cardijja complained about shortages in order to build his own supply depot in Meliban. We must do something about that.”

“You want the two of us to attack Meliban?” frowned Lady Mystic. “Inconceivable. In addition to ten thousand soldiers, there were more than a hundred mages there. Do not get cocky, Xavo. We are mortal.”

“Very mortal,” nodded Xavo. “I do not plan to take on the whole Motangan army, but I did find out the route that the caravans use. If we can attack them before they reach Cardijja’s men, we can accomplish something useful while we wait for the right opportunity to go to Vandegar.”

“It would be nice if we could get the tribes to attack Meliban,” mused Lady Mystic. “Do you know how to contact the Fakarans?”

“No,” Xavo shook his head, “but I can contact Emperor Marak. He will know how to reach the Fakarans. I doubt that they know of the amount of supplies in Meliban. If they did, they would have destroyed the city already.”

“Let’s get further away before we do that,” suggested Lady Mystic. “The Fakarans are just as likely to kill us as anyone else. I doubt they would even give us time to talk our way out of an attack.”

“You are more right than you know,” sighed Xavo. “To the tribes, we are just another couple of black cloaks. Perhaps we should find something else to wear. I could pass myself off as a trader and you as

my wife."

"Now that sounds interesting," grinned Lady Mystic.

* * *

"All of the bridges over the rivers have been destroyed," reported General Chen. "Our position is untenable. The Khadorans have hundreds of siege engines pounding our armies from across the Khadora River. We have to pull back until we can determine a way across the river."

"It takes time to build siege engines," scowled Premer Shamal. "We have been ordered to make haste to Khadoratung. Get the mages to come up with a way to get us across."

"We have only a handful of mages left," General Chen shook his head. "The battle at the third trench took a terrible toll on them."

"It was necessary," shrugged Shamal, "just as it is necessary to cross this river. Emperor Vand has lost his patience. He wants Khadora conquered quickly so our armies can cross the Fortung Mountains and search for Angragar."

"The emperor cannot always get what he wants," the general replied softly. "If we move too quickly, our losses will be great."

"And you think the emperor cares?" Shamal asked with raised eyebrows. "His armies are merely tools to acquire his personal goals. You must be aware of that."

"I am," nodded General Chen, "but I also wish to cling to life. If that means that the men must be sacrificed, I can play that game."

"As can I," agreed Premer Shamal, "but those same men are what protects us from the Khadorans. I will not throw my armies away needlessly to meet some arbitrary goal. So far our losses have been acceptable, but we are close to crossing that line. How do we cross the river quickly and still have an army when we are done?"

"There are only two ways," answered General Chen. "We can backtrack along the river to find a ford, or we can build siege engines and obliterate the city of Sintula. Both options slow us down."

Premer Shamal said nothing, but he began pacing. General Chen had known the premer long enough to understand that the pacing meant that Shamal was not happy with the alternatives. He held his tongue and let his superior pace in silence.

"There is a third solution," Premer Shamal finally said, his eyes twinkling with victory over the mental exercise. "Send out patrols upstream along the Khadora River. They are to be covert inspections. I do not want the enemy to realize that our interest in the river is more than cursory."

"You want them to look for a ford?" asked General Chen.

"They should act like they are looking for a ford," smiled Premer Shamal, "but what I really want to know is how far upstream the

Khadorans are watching. They know this river well, so if there is a ford upstream we can be sure that it will be guarded."

"So you are more interested in finding out if we will be observed upstream?" questioned the general. "What do you have in mind if we are not being watched?"

"Rafts," smiled Premer Shamal. "Simple rafts. The rafts can be created in the forest beyond the prying eyes of the enemy. During the night we will ferry our men across the river upstream from Sintula. When the Khadorans wake in the morning, our armies will be attacking the city from the east instead of being on the south side of the river."

"An excellent plan," grinned General Chen. "It is simple, yet ingenious. I will see to immediately."

* * *

"They have backed away from the river," reported Marshal Berman. "There do not appear to be any siege machines being constructed. They are just standing there."

"Something smells," frowned Emperor Marak. "They should be building siege engines to attack the city. Are you sure they are not building them out of sight?"

"I cannot be sure of that," admitted Marshal Berman, "but I can see no activity at all in the enemy camp. We need a spy across the river."

"If they had no plans to use siege engines as all," interjected Lord Patel, "I would think that they would at least make the appearance of building some. Even if it was just to throw us off."

"Perhaps," replied Lord Chenowith, "but maybe not. Maybe Shamal is just letting his men rest before the attack. They covered the distance from the third trench in an amazingly short time. They must be tired."

"They raced to reach Sintula," frowned the Torak. "That alone indicates that they are in a hurry to conquer us. Perhaps the defeat of Premer Doralin in the Sakova has created some kind of urgency in Vand's plans. I cannot believe that Shamal raced to Sintula only to rest his men. It makes no sense."

"What can he do without siege engines?" asked Lord Quilo. "If he tries coming across the river, we will decimate his troops."

"If he does it where we can see him," mused the emperor.

"The closest ford is over a day away," remarked Marshal Berman. "If he was planning on fording the river, his whole army would be in motion. They are not moving."

"Nevertheless," stated the Torak, "he is planning on crossing the river. It is the only thing he can do. Send horsemen upstream, Marshal. I do not want them on the banks of the river where the

enemy can see them. Keep them inland a bit."

"But then they will not be able to see what the enemy is up to," frowned Marshal Berman. "What good will that do?"

"I am more interested in what they hear," smiled the Torak. "I want to know if they hear any sounds of felling trees, or crafting wood."

"Boats?" asked Lord Kiamesh.

"Boats, rafts, a bridge," shrugged the Torak. "It doesn't matter what their plan is, but where it is. Wherever we hear the sounds of falling trees, that will be where the Motangans plan to cross the river."

"And what do we do when we find it?" asked Lord Jamarat.

"We deny them the chance to cross," answered he emperor.

"So we move thousands of men to stop them from crossing," pondered Lord Patel. "Meanwhile, they move their bridge building operation to another spot on the river. We cannot afford to watch the whole river. They will eventually succeed in crossing it."

"You are correct," nodded Marak. "We cannot possibly stop them from crossing. All we can do is to make them waste men and time. Both of those are important to Premer Shamal. Let us plan to make him waste much of both."

Chapter 27

Secret Gambles

Bakhai sat on a high ledge on the western foothills of the Bone Mountains. He gazed down on the Motangan encampment hundreds of paces below him. Tall sevemore trees stretched high from the massive encampment, and figures in red appeared in spots wherever there was not a tree. The red carpet below the green trees spread for leagues in every direction.

"It is massive," Bakhai said with a tone of defeatism. "The camp goes on forever. There is no way that I can go down there and find out where Cardijja is heading. It is impossible. Why did Rejji choose me for this task?"

"Because he believes in you," soothed the female voice next to him, "as I believe in you. No one else would stand a chance of getting close enough to learn their secrets. Only you can do it."

"I cannot do it," balked Bakhai. "I am not a spy. I have no special skills that will allow me to pry their secrets from them. I just can't do it."

"You do have special skills," she insisted. "You grew up in these forests. You know them better than any man alive. Besides, you do have special skills."

"What?" retorted Bakhai. "Talking to animals? A load of good that will do. These Motangans only have a handful of horses. I cannot bend the minds of humans, Mistake. That is not what I do."

"Are you forgetting the thousands of friends that surround you?" encouraged Princess Alahara. "Surely they can help you accomplish the task."

"How?" frowned Bakhai. "Will I call on the chipmunks to attack the Motangans? Will the river otters leave the creeks to come rescue me? This is just a foolish idea. I will not do it. We will rest the night here and return to Angragar in the morning."

The elven princess frowned as she stared down at the Motangans. Suddenly a thought popped into her mind.

"I will get you into the premer's tent," grinned Princess Alahara.

"How?" asked Bakhai. "They would not hesitate to kill an elf if they saw you, Mistake."

"They will see me," smiled Princess Alahara. "I want them to. Come on. We need to hurry. I want to get you in before the daylight is gone. I will tell you about my plan on the way down."

* * *

Princess Alahara peered past the tree at the nearby Motangan sentries. She turned back to Bakhai and smiled.

“More ragged than that,” she shook her head as she reached and ripped Bakhai’s tunic. “Rub some dirt on your face.”

Bakhai dug his fingers into the dirt near the base of the tree. He drove his fingers deeper until he felt moist soil. He pulled out his fingers and slashed them across his face. Mistake was busy ripping small tears in his clothes.

“Are you sure this will work?” asked Bakhai. “I am not afraid to take a chance, but this seems so outlandish.”

“It may be just that,” Mistake said truthfully. “We cannot know for sure how the Motangans will react, but even how they react will tell us much.”

“What do you mean?” asked Bakhai.

“If Cardijja is intent on finding Angragar,” she explained, “he will question you about it. If he has no desire to question you then he probably already knows the location. That is what you have come to find out.”

“So if they kill me on the spot,” frowned Bakhai, “you can go back and tell Rejji that they are heading for Angragar.”

“You are not going to die, Bakhai,” promised the elven princess. “I will not allow that to happen. If I have to charge into that encampment to save you, I will. Are you ready?”

Bakhai sighed deeply and stared into Mistake’s eyes. He nodded slowly.

“I am ready,” he said, “but you are not to rescue me. I do not want that on my conscience. If they kill me, I will just go to Kaltara earlier than I had hoped.”

Princess Alahara opened her mouth to object, but Bakhai was already on his feet. He screamed loudly and dashed around, letting the sentries get a good look at him. Eventually he ran towards the sentries, seemingly falling to the ground as if he had tripped over something. A fireball soared through the air and smashed into the ground a few paces from Bakhai. The sentries shouted in alarm as they sought cover to protect themselves from the magical attack. Bakhai called out to the Motangans for help, but they ignored him. Princess Alahara stepped into the open and sneered at Bakhai. The sentries shouted for mages and archers.

“Die traitor!” spat the elven princess as she tossed another fireball at Bakhai.

Bakhai quickly rolled to one side as the fireball struck the ground where he had fallen. Mistake turned and fled into the forest as the archers arrived. Motangan arrows chased the elven princess into the

woods, but she was too quick for them to hit. A squad of soldiers raced past Bakhai and gave chase to the elf. Bakhai looked towards the camp and saw an officer approaching him. A dozen soldiers accompanied the officer, and Bakhai shivered with genuine fear.

"Help me," implored Bakhai. "Don't let her kill me."

The Motangan soldiers surrounded Bakhai, their swords drawn and pointed towards him. They appeared to be awaiting the officer's command to shove their swords into his flesh.

"Who are you?" demanded the officer.

"Help me," pleaded Bakhai. "Don't let her kill me. She is an evil spirit."

"Evil spirit?" smirked the officer. "She is nothing but an elf. Who are you?"

"I am just a village boy," Bakhai replied timidly. "I am called Bakhai. She is an evil spirit. There are no more elves. She has been following me ever since I entered the jungle."

"Jungle?" questioned the officer. "What jungle?"

Bakhai started crying. He buried his head in his hands and let tears stains his cheeks. The officer shook his head with disgust. He raised his hand to give the soldiers the signal to kill the captive, but he paused for some reason. His hesitation gave enough pause for another officer to arrive.

"What is going on here?" asked the newly arrived general.

"I am not sure," admitted the officer. "An elf magician tried to kill this boy, although he claims that she is an evil spirit. He said something about a jungle. I think he is crazy. I will have my men dispose of him."

"No," countermanded the general. "Is he armed?"

"Not that I can see," replied the officer. "He is barely dressed."

"What of the elf?" asked the general.

"She escaped into the forest," answered the officer. "I have men tracking her down."

"Good," the general nodded satisfactorily. "Have some of your men bind the captive and bring him to my tent. I want to interrogate him. Perhaps he can tell us something about this land. There is no mention of a jungle on my maps."

"As you wish," saluted the officer.

* * *

The sky was clear, and the waxing moon was only days away from being full. The star-studded sky reflected in the smooth flowing water of the Khadora River. It was an idyllic scene, for the moment. A short distance beyond the sevemore trees that lined the northern bank of the river, three thousand Khadoran archers stood silently, waiting for the order to approach the riverbank and open fire. Across the river

the distant telltale sounds of hatchets striking wood drifted in the still night air.

Marshal GeHert of the Nordon clan turned to the air mage next to him and whispered softly, “Inform the Lords’ Council that we have found another spot on the river where the Motangans plan to cross. Notify them that I have three thousand archers ready to counterattack.”

The air mage nodded silently and wove an air tunnel to Sintula. At the other end of the air tunnel, a mage called for Lord Patel. The Nordon lord took the report from Marshal GeHert and hurried into the meeting room where the Lords’ Council was meeting with the emperor.

“Another one,” sighed Lord Patel as he entered the room. “This one from GeHert. He is about six leagues to our east.”

“Have the Motangans started crossing yet?” asked Lord Jamarat.

“Not yet,” answered the Nordon lord, “but they will soon enough. Our men are too spread out.”

“Shamal is no fool,” sighed Emperor Marak. “Even after he knows that we have detected his plan, he is wise enough to know that we cannot foil it completely. With the amount of men that he has, he is capable of extending the front for hundreds of leagues. That is exactly what we have been trying to avoid. We cannot afford to spread ourselves that thin.”

“The only alternative,” countered Lord Quilo, “is to let the Motangans cross the river. I do not see how that aids us.”

“It does not aid us to let them cross,” replied Lord Kiamesh, “but we cannot stop it from happening either. If Shamal succeeds in getting men across the river, our defenses of Sintula are worthless.”

“Worse,” interjected Lord Chenowith, “if his men cross anywhere other than the farthest eastern spot we have detected, he will have some of our archers cut off from Sintula. Those men would die quickly as they tried to get back here.”

“There is no pattern to the spots he has chosen to cross,” added Lord Faliman. “At first they kept going further eastward, but that has changed. This latest attack shows that any spot along the river is a likely crossing place.”

“And the weather has favored us so far,” remarked the Torak. “If this night was overcast, we would be hard pressed to find targets when his men tried to cross the river. We need to start thinking about an orderly retreat.”

“So soon?” asked Lord Jamarat. “The Motangans have not even reached this shore yet.”

“They will soon,” answered the Torak, “If we wait until they attack the city, we will lose thousands of men. I am not suggesting

that we evacuate immediately. Just that we start preparing now. My goal is to kill as many Motangans as we can as they try to cross the river, but retreat once they have troops on this side of the river."

"We keep falling back whenever the Motangans threaten us," frowned Lord Jamarat. "Our men are willing to stand and fight to defend Khadora. Why not let Sintula be the place to show our bravery?"

"No one questions the bravery of our men, Lord Jamarat," the Torak smiled tautly, "at least not in this room. Tens of thousands of Khadorans have already given up their lives to halt this Motangan invasion, but that is not the measure of our worth. It is the number of dead Motangans that we need to concentrate on. Go down to the city docks and gaze upon the river. Thousands of Motangan bodies are floating past this city. Shamal is paying a terrible price to cross the Khadora River, but eventually he will succeed. We are not capable of denying him that small victory."

"But they will destroy Sintula and march on to Chantise," frowned the simple-minded lord. "Crossing the Charl River will be the only obstacle to stop him from reaching Khadoratung and the Imperial Valley."

"No, Lord Jamarat," smiled the emperor. "Shamal will never reach the Charl River."

"You have a plan in mind?" asked Lord Quilo.

"I do indeed," nodded Marak. "It is a plan that will require extraordinary planning and extreme secrecy, but it will crush the Motangan army."

"Then let us plan it and get started on it," urged Lord Patel.

"The planning is already underway," confessed the Torak. "I apologize for keeping this council ignorant of the plan, but a single word to the enemy would be disastrous for us. I could not take the chance that one of our men might be captured and tortured, so I have kept knowledge of the plan to myself."

"Does this plan require that we abandon Sintula earlier than we wish?" frowned Lord Kiamesh. "I am afraid that I agree with Lord Jamarat. The Khadora River is a natural defense for us. Even considering the loss of many Khadorans, we can inflict much more damage on the Motangans by refusing to yield the northern bank of the river."

"I agree with your assessment," sighed the Torak, "but my plan does require us to leave Sintula shortly. The Motangans must be in pursuit of us by high sun tomorrow."

"High sun?" echoed Lord Kiamesh. "They will not be done sacking Sintula by then even if they cross the river right now."

"They will not pause to sack Sintula," assured the emperor.

“Shamal’s moves shows that he is suddenly in a hurry to finish with Khadora. That haste will destroy him. I will explain my plan now,” he added after a moment’s pause, “but I must warn you that no one outside this room is to learn of it. I must have your vows on this.”

* * *

The Torak walked the deserted streets of Sintula, his shadows watching for friendly eyes as well as those of the enemy. North of the city, the cavalries of the Lords’ Council sat patiently waiting to provide defensive cover for the retreating archers. The Motangans had finally managed to cross the river just before dawn, and they were currently marching westward towards Sintula. Within the hour the vanguard of Shamal’s troops would reach the city.

The Torak turned into an alley and halted. Halman and Gunta scanned the alley looking for any signs of life. There were none. Marak moved cautiously along the alley and halted at a nondescript door leading to a warehouse. He knocked on the door in a cryptic rhythm and waited. Halman and Gunta concealed their curiosity as they flanked the Torak. The door slowly opened, revealing a large darkened room. Halman immediately leaped through the door, his sword held menacingly before him. His eyes scanned the dim room, searching for inhabitants. Emperor Marak stepped into the room and motioned for Gunta to follow. The Torak closed the door, dimming the light even further.

“Relax,” Marak said softly to his shadows. “There is no one here to harm me.”

Halman and Gunta reluctantly sheathed their swords, but Marak chuckled inwardly as he saw both of them fist Sakovan stars.

“Time is short, Fisher,” the Torak said to the silent room. “Come into view before my shadows cause you harm.”

A pile of hay in the corner of the room moved. Halman and Gunta tensed as they watch a black-clad figure emerge from the pile. They relaxed somewhat when they recognized Fisher, but their eyes continued to scan the darkness.

“You are early,” Fisher said softly as he brushed off the hay and approached the Torak.

“Not by much,” shrugged Marak. “Is this where you will hide the horses?”

“They are in the far corner,” nodded the spy. “They are sleeping.”

“I would not have noticed them,” smiled the Torak. “Are you sure this place is secure enough to avoid detection?”

“It is the safest place in Sintula,” nodded Fisher. “I have checked them all out. The Motangans will not find us here.”

The Torak turned to face his shadows, confusion evident on their faces.

“I am leaving you two here to help Fisher,” he said softly.

“Leaving us?” objected Gunta. “That is not wise.”

“It is necessary,” replied the emperor. “Fisher will explain the details, but he needs your help after the Motangans pass through Sintula. I cannot think of three men who could possibly have a better chance at avoiding the enemy’s scrutiny when they pass through the city.”

“We do not mind the task, whatever it is,” frowned Halman, “but we are loathe to abandon you. The enemy is far too close for you to be unprotected.”

“I will be leaving on Myka,” replied the Torak. “Rest assured in the knowledge that I will not be unprotected. Your task is of vital importance.”

“What is the nature of this task?” asked Gunta.

Marak sighed and smiled tautly. He had planned to let Fisher reveal it, but he understood the hesitancy of his shadows. Their lives were sworn to protecting the Torak.

“Simply put,” answered Marak, “there is a bridge across the Khadora River that has escaped the notice of the Motangans. The bridge rests on the bed of the river. There are concealed ropes attached to it on each side of the river. You three must raise the northern side of the bridge as soon as the Motangans pass through Sintula. Fisher has all of the details and will brief you when the time comes.”

“I have a winch set aside to help us,” offered Fisher. “The whole task will only take a few hours.”

“And who will raise the other end?” asked Halman.

The Torak grinned and turned to leave.

* * *

The Motangan general walked into the tent and saluted. He stood silently waiting to be addressed.

“I understand that you have a prisoner,” stated Premer Cardijja as he turned away from General Luggar to face the new arrival.

“A boy,” nodded the general. “I think he may have valuable information. He was being chased by an elf, which he thought was an evil spirit.”

“Are you sure it was an elf?” asked the premer.

“That is what was reported,” shrugged the general. “I expect that our men know what an elf looks like. She was a mage as well. She cast fireballs at the boy.”

“Have him brought here,” demanded the premer. “I wish for nothing to be lost in the interrogation.”

“As you command,” frowned the general, obviously unhappy with the turn of events.

The general left the tent and Premer Cardijja returned to the map on the table. General Luggar looked at the premer curiously.

“Why bring him here?” asked Luggar. “The mages are better suited to extracting information from him.”

“The mages are just as likely to kill him in their enthusiasm to get information,” answered the premer. “They have certainly failed miserably with the past captives. I need to know where Angragar is, and I cannot wait any longer. The lad is quite possibly the best prospect we have captured. He will not be as worldly as the soldiers that we have interrogated.”

“I understand,” nodded General Luggar as two soldiers dragged Bakhai into the tent.

“Stop mishandling him,” scowled Premer Cardijja. “He is a guest here.”

The soldiers were taken by surprise by the premer’s orders. They helped Bakhai to his feet and then let go of his arms. They bowed curtly and backed out of the tent.

“Come have something to eat,” smiled the premer as he held out a plate of dried meat. “What is your name?”

“I am called Bakhai,” the lad said nervously as he reached for the food.

The premer watched the boy greedily swallow the food. He shook his head and smiled.

“Chew your food properly,” the premer said softly. “You can have more if you wish. I understand that you were being chased when my soldiers found you.”

Bakhai nodded exaggeratedly as he grabbed another piece of meat. “She was an evil spirit,” he volunteered.

“And why would an evil spirit chase you?” asked the premer.

“I do not know,” shrugged Bakhai. “I did nothing to offend her.”

“Where do you live?” the premer asked, trying a different tact.

“I live in the mountains,” answered Bakhai. “The forest is my home.”

“Do you know this land well?” asked Cardijja.

Bakhai nodded again as he chewed on another piece of meat. “Is there water?” he asked.

General Luggar filled a mug from the pitcher and handed it to Bakhai. The boy took the mug and smiled at the general. Luggar sighed with impatience.

“Have you heard of Angragar?” asked the premer.

“The lost city,” nodded Bakhai.

“Where is it?” asked Premer Cardijja.

Bakhai stared blankly at the premer as if he had asked a rhetorical question.

“You are wasting your time,” sighed General Luggar. “He knows nothing.”

Premer Cardijja glowered at the general and then quickly smiled at the lad. “Do you know where Angragar is?” the premer asked again.

“It is lost,” shrugged Bakhai as he gulped down some water. “That is why it is called the lost city.”

“Well I want to find it,” the premer said with a smile. “Perhaps you can tell me where not to look for it?”

Bakhai’s mind raced to figure out how he should answer the question. He realized that he had already determined that Cardijja did not know the location of Angragar, but he thought that there might be more that he could do while he had the ear of the premer.

“I know many places that it is not,” offered Bakhai. “Maybe that is why the evil spirit was chasing me,” he added with seemingly sudden understanding. “I tried going to a new place and she attacked without warning.”

“Oh?” Premer Cardijja responded with interest. “Is this new place around here?”

“Not here,” Bakhai shook his head exaggeratedly. “She chased me for many days. Many times I thought I had escaped from her, but always she came back.”

“Come and look at this map, Bakhai,” urged Cardijja. “Point to where you were exploring when she first chased you.”

Bakhai walked over to the map and studied it. He was amazed at the lack of detail on the map. He noted freshly drawn lines that had been added, but the land east of the mountains was an empty void. He quickly realized that the Motangans had no idea where they were heading. They were drawing the map as they went.

“Bakhai, does not understand the pictures,” the lad shrugged. He watched the premer sigh with disappointment. Bakhai smiled broadly and added, “I can show you the way.”

Premer Cardijja grinned with success as he turned and laid a hand gently on Bakhai’s shoulder.

“And so you shall,” smiled the premer. “Luggar, arrange for a mat to be brought in here. Bakhai will be staying with me.”

“Is that wise?” General Luggar said softly as Bakhai went to the other table and sampled some more food. “He may be just a boy, but he is not that young. His physical growth has certainly outpaced his mind, but you are foolish to dismiss a danger to your person. Let him sleep outside.”

Premer Cardijja turned and watched Bakhai closely. The lad appeared to be interested in nothing but the free food, still the general had a valid concern.

“Very well,” nodded Premer Cardijja. “Bakhai will sleep outside

the tent, but I do not want him bullied by the soldiers. He is to have freedom of the camp, but he is not to be allowed to leave it. Only if he tries to leave are the soldiers to bother him. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly," nodded General Luggar. "Do you really think that he can lead us to the lost city? He has admitted to not knowing where it is."

"The elf was trying to kill him for some reason," offered the premer. "It is said that the elves protected the ancient city of Angragar, yet there has been no record from our spies that any elves still existed here in Fakara. I think the lad stumbled onto something that he wasn't supposed to, and the elves were trying to preserve their secret. In any event, we have nothing to lose. We are tasked to map this country and find Angragar. As long as he leads us further eastward, we have paid nothing for his information. I think it is worth the gamble. If something better comes along, I may change my mind, but for now I will follow Bakhai."

The general nodded and left the tent to procure a sleeping mat for the lad. Bakhai dropped the air tunnel he had used to listen to the conversation. He reached forward with both hands and filled them with pieces of dried meat.

"You act like you have not eaten in days," chuckled Premer Cardijja as he approached Bakhai. "Slow down or your stomach will ache."

Chapter 28

Vand's Slaves

Lord Marshal Yenga led his troops through the town of Deep Bend, named for the way the Khadora River turned at a right angle at the base of the Bear Mountains. Just past the town of Deep Bend was Khadora's largest mining operation. A huge tunnel led deep into the southernmost of the Bear Mountains. Hundreds of other tunnels dotted the side of the mountain, but it was the mammoth tunnel that was Yenga's destination. He led the Torak army past the docks where massive barges were tied up. The barges were usually used to send ores downriver to Chantise and Khadoratung, but the mine was not in operation at the moment.

Yenga led the cavalry up the steep slope and into the mammoth tunnel. As they entered the mouth of the tunnel, they became momentarily blind, as only torches lighted the tunnel. After a few moments their eyes became accustomed to the dim light, and they proceeded onward. The tunnel emptied into a massive chamber with dozens of tunnels running out of it. Yenga paid no attention to the tunnels, but he grinned broadly at the assembled clans waiting for him. The Ragatha, Litari, and Sorgan clans were already assembled, along with the remnants of the Situ clan. They were all clans that were sworn directly to the Torak.

"At last," greeted Lord Sevrin of the Ragatha clan. "I was beginning to wonder if you would miss the party."

"Not a chance, grinned Yenga as he dismounted. "I took a side trip to gather more men."

"Who else is coming?" asked Lord Shamino of the Sorgan clan.

"The Seth and Disina clans are right behind me," replied Lord Marshal Yenga.

"And not the Rican clan?" asked Lord Shamino.

"I chose not to ask them," frowned Yenga.

"A wise move," Lord Sevrin said softly. "I question even the invite being extended to the Seth and Disina clans."

"I discussed it with the emperor," shrugged Yenga. "He feels that they were manipulated by the Ricans. I tend to agree, and we need the extra men."

"What about protecting the frontier?" asked Lord Shamino.

"The war in the Sakova is over," smiled Yenga. "We no longer have to fear an attack from the south." Turning to Lord Sevrin he

continued, “Have you posted the mages as requested?”

“Even better than requested,” nodded Lord Sevrin. “We have at least a dozen mages spread out over the peaks of the Bear Mountains. We will be able to watch the progress of the Motangan armies across the river. There is an air hole at the back of this chamber that goes all the way to the surface. There are several mages stationed back there to relay any messages to us.”

“Excellent,” nodded Yenga. “I want hourly reports at the minimum. I also want to know the minute something unusual happens. When our time comes, there will be little of it to spare. Here come Lord Sydar and Lord Woroman. Let’s try to make them feel welcome. Past difficulties need to be put aside.”

* * *

The lords of the Lords’ Council each rode at the head of their armies as they moved north through the forest. At times the peaks of the Three Sisters could be seen towering above the sevemore trees on their right. At other times the road came close to the roaring Khadora River on their left. Nowhere along the road was there a wide expanse of open land.

The Walkan army led the procession. Only the scouts preceded Lord Chenowith and he kept the armies moving at a decent pace. His mind wandered as he thought about the emperor’s plan. He tried to envision what awaited him ahead, but he could not picture it, so he felt great anticipation when the scouts announced that the forest was about to end. Picking up the pace slightly, the Walkan lord rode forward. When he came to the edge of the forest, he halted his horse. The armies began to slow behind him, and he moved to one side and waved them onward.

Standing before the Khadoran armies was a massive cleared area. The forest had been felled in a wide swath from the base of the Three Sisters to the banks of the Khadora River. Jutting across this wide-open area was a huge earthen berm. There were three wide earthen ramps leading over the berm. The Walkan lord shook his head and stared in amazement. The defensive works were huge and must have consumed thousands of men for an extremely long period of time. He could not believe that he it had been accomplished without anyone knowing about it.

“Incredible,” commented Lord Patel as he halted alongside Lord Chenowith. “I know Marak said that he had a berm created, but I never imagined anything of this scope. How did he do it?”

“An excellent question,” replied Lord Chenowith, “seeing as we came along this road only a month ago. If someone were to ask me how long it would take to construct such a fortification, I would have said years. The Torak really must explain how he accomplished this.”

“With magic no doubt,” remarked Lord Kiamesh as he halted beside the other two lords. “It is magnificent. I can well understand the Torak’s desire to meet the Motangans here. They have a narrow path through the woods, which will clump them all up, and then this. They will not even be able to build siege engines without hampering the movement of their own troops. It is brilliant.”

“And only a small part of his plan,” added Lord Quilo as he joined the group. “I am beginning to feel optimistic about our chances for the first time. Even if everything else doesn’t come together quite right, we should be able to hold this berm for a long time.”

“Let’s get to the other side and see the guts of it,” suggested Lord Kiamesh.

“It is only fair to wait for Lord Jamarat and Lord Faliman first,” replied Lord Chenowith. “It would be good for the morale of the troops to see the Lords’ Council ride in as one.”

* * *

Fisher slid down the rope from the trap door in the roof. He landed noiselessly on the floor of the abandoned warehouse and was immediately joined by Halman and Gunta.

“The last of the Motangans have passed through,” Fisher announced. “The supply train was endless. I thought it might be morning before we had a chance to get out of here.”

“Do you think the delay will cause problems?” asked Gunta.

“I cannot say,” answered Fisher. “In any event, we had no choice. I would not dare to resurrect the bridge until the Motangans were gone. Let’s move quickly.”

The three black-clad warriors retrieved their horses and led them out of the warehouse. It was only a short distance to the river where Fisher handed his horse to Halman and walked out onto the dock. Kneeling on the dock, the spy reached under the wooden structure and grabbed a string. Holding the string tightly, he walked off the dock and along the wharf to a point near the winch. He gently pulled on the string until a sturdy rope appeared. Grabbing the rope firmly, Fisher called softly for his horse. Halman brought it to him, and Fisher tied the rope to his saddle.

“There will be two more ropes knotted to this one,” explained Fisher. “When they come up out of the river, tie them to your horses.”

Halman and Gunta nodded as Fisher led his horse forward. As the horse moved away from the river, the rope rose out of the water. Eventually it came out far enough for the Torak’s shadows to grab the two additional ropes. They untied the ropes and secured them to their horses. When the ropes were tied securely, Fisher led his horse forward to the wall of the nearest building. Set in concrete at the base of the building was a large winch. Fisher untied his rope and fed it

into the winch. He turned and grinned at his partners.

"We need to light a torch to alert those on the other side of the river," announced Fisher.

"Who is waiting over there?" asked Gunta, his eyes straining to see across the river.

"All I know is that they are friends," shrugged Fisher. "There must be a lot of them if Marak wanted to go through all this trouble to allow them to cross."

Halman found an old torch and brought it to life. He held it high and waved it back and forth. He watched the opposite bank closely, expecting to see a torch in reply. He was rather shocked when the voice spoke to him.

"You must be Fisher," said the voice. "Are you ready to do what must be done?"

"I am Halman," the shadow replied hesitantly. "We are ready to raise the bridge."

There was a short pause without reply. Halman heard whispering and then laughing coming through the air tunnel. He frowned in confusion.

"Well, shadow of the Torak," the voice suddenly said, "let us begin."

Fisher shrugged with indifference as he started operating the winch. Gunta and Halman led their horses towards the building where two metal rings were imbedded in the foundation. When there was enough slack in the ropes, the shadows passed the ends through the metal rings and tied them. Fisher secured the winch, and the three Khadorans walked back to the dock to watch.

Slowly the ropes tightened as the people on the opposite shore pulled their end of the ropes. The Khadorans watched as a footbridge slowly rose out of the river. Water cascaded off the bridge, as the ropes grew taut. Suddenly figures appeared on the bridge. Halman and Gunta tensed, but Fisher merely watched with interest. Moments later the figures became identifiable. The three Khadorans bowed in respect.

"Tayo," greeted King Avalar. "I appreciate your help in getting across the river."

"We did not know who to expect," replied Fisher. "Have you brought many with you?"

"Thousands," grinned the elven king as he stepped aside to let his men pass by. "I trust that the Motangans are not far ahead of us?"

"Their tail is but an hour away," replied Fisher, "but their column is long. They have been marching through Sintula since high sun, and that column is unbroken."

"That is a large number of Motangans," smiled Princess Alastasia

as she stepped alongside her father. “I trust the Khadoran fields can use the extra fertilizer?”

“You have not changed, MistyTrail,” grinned Gunta. “Welcome back to Khadora.”

“I am known as Princess Alastasia to my people,” smiled the elven princess, “but I do not think they would mind your calling me by my old name.”

Gunta looked embarrassed, but Avalar smiled warmly. “As long as her name is held in respect,” he said in a friendly manner, “you may call her what you wish. I was told that the Torak would leave a map for me.”

Fisher nodded and pulled a map out of his black suit. He handed it to the elven king. Halman held the torch high as Avalar gazed at the map. He looked up at the city briefly and then back to the map. Alastasia looked over his shoulder.

“Direct our people to the western edge of the city, daughter,” instructed the king. “Once we are assembled, we shall begin the long march.”

Princess Alastasia nodded and ran to the milling group of elven archers. She led them away to the west and those still crossing the bridge followed. King Avalar watched in satisfaction for a moment and then turned to the three Khadorans.

“You are welcome to join my people for our part in this battle,” King Avalar said. “From what I have heard about the three of you, there are few Khadorans more likely to appreciate the elven ways.”

* * *

“You were supposed to ensure that he got away,” Rejji frowned into the air tunnel.

“He refused to leave, Rejji,” replied Mistake. “He is obviously free to send air tunnel messages out, but I dare not try to contact him. If one of the black-cloaks senses an air tunnel going into the encampment, I will jeopardize Bakhai’s life.”

“Why would he freely stay in the enemy’s camp?” retorted the Astor. “He has already found out that they do not know where Angragar is. That is all we asked him to do.”

“He thinks he can do more,” replied the elven princess. “He wants to guide which way the Motangans go. He has asked me to contact you and let him know what to say to Premer Cardijja.”

“It is too dangerous,” Rejji shook his head. “I want you to tell him to get out of there. If he needs a distraction, I will send the free tribes to attack.”

“I have already told him to leave,” sighed Mistake as she remembered trying to get Rejji to leave the Zaldoni encampment when they first met. “He refuses. He is stubborn like his brother.”

Silence followed and Mistake pictured Rejji pacing back and forth. She heard distant murmurs and realized the Astor was getting advice from others. After a long pause, Rejji's voice came through the air tunnel.

"Does he know how to contact you once the Motangan army starts marching again?" asked the Astor.

"I have promised him that I would be exactly one league east of the camp each night," answered Princess Alastasia, "but he cannot contact me when the army is on the move."

"I am going to send out a Qubari shaman to take your place," stated Rejji. "For now you are to tell Bakhai to guide the Motangans through the pass between the Bone Mountains and the Giaming Mountains. Warn him that the column will be attacked. I don't want our people to accidentally kill my brother."

"Why are you replacing me?" frowned Mistake. "I was responsible for him getting caught."

"You did what was asked of you," replied Rejji. "I expected both of you to return immediately, but that is not how things panned out. Now you need to return here to lead your people. Tell Bakhai of the change when he contacts you."

* * *

The dragon flew low over the forest east of the Three Sisters. At the Torak's command, she banked sharply and soared up the face of the middle mountain. When she reached the peak, she hovered momentarily as the people scattered to make room for her to land.

"They always remind me of dinner when they scurry about like that," quipped Myka.

The Torak laughed and shook his head as he slid off of Myka's back. He strode briskly towards the group of people and embraced his father.

"How is it going?" the Torak asked.

"The Motangans are not stopping for the night," replied Ukaro. "It is like watching an unending river of red from up here. Come, I will show you."

The Chula shaman led the Torak to an outcropping where several Chula shaman sat. Marak sat among them and peered into the river valley. Far below was a line of red uniforms marching north. He tried to follow the line of red back to the city of Sintula, but the moonlight was inadequate for that. Still, the armies of the Motangans were impressive.

"Your clansmen across the river are also ready," remarked Ukaro. "We saw the black and silver arrive earlier today."

"And the elves to the south?" asked the Torak.

"Of them we have had no word," shrugged Ukaro, "but we are

not likely to either. I suspect that the elves know how to remain unseen. I do not waste my time looking for them."

"Are your people ready to play your part?" asked Marak.

"We are your people, Torak," grinned Axor who was sitting nearby, "and yes we are ready. We assembled three days ago. Our time has been spent in prayer."

"Then it has been time well spent," smiled the Torak. "When do you estimate that the vanguard will reach the earthen berm?"

"High sun tomorrow," answered Ukaro.

"If they don't stop to rest," interjected Axor.

"They will be quite tired if they don't stop," mused Marak. "Can Shamal really be in such a hurry?"

"Perhaps he thinks that the Khadorans have fled to Chantise," shrugged Ukaro. "If you had planned a reception for him in Chantise as you did in Sintula, his men would have ample time to rest there while trying to figure out a way to cross the river."

"Then Shamal has made a grievous error," replied the Torak. "His tired men will be attacked from four sides simultaneously. Let us pray that his error is fatal."

* * *

Xavo reined in his horse and turned to look out over the plain to the west. He stared at the distant dust cloud with curiosity.

"What is it?" asked Lady Mystic as she halted alongside him.

"It is a sizeable movement," answered Xavo. "If it is a caravan, it is a large one."

"Could it be soldiers from Meliban coming after us?" asked Lady Mystic. "They may have communicated with Vandegar and found out that we are traitors."

"I do not think of us as traitors," replied Xavo. "Only a fool would willingly follow Vand. Anyone who values life is obligated to work against him."

"You forget that I am his daughter," frowned Lady Mystic. "For me to go against my father is an act of treason."

Xavo sighed heavily and reached for his lover's hand. "Do not punish yourself for your decisions," he said gently. "You had no control over who your parents were. It is far more important that you chose the right path than blindly succumbing to a madman's commands."

Lady Mystic smiled tautly and squeezed Xavo's hand. Her facial expression showed her doubt in Xavo's words, but her eyes twinkled with love. Xavo smiled broadly and returned the squeeze.

"In any event," he continued, "whatever is coming this way is not on foot. The dust cloud is moving too fast for that. It is definitely horses, and that leaves only two possibilities to my mind. Either it is

riders of the Fakaran tribes, or it is a caravan. Either one requires some action on our part."

"You would not attack the Fakarans?" questioned Lady Mystic. "Would you?"

"Of course not," replied Xavo, "but I would hide from them. They are just as likely to kill us as the Motangans."

"Well," retorted Lady Mystic, "they will die if they attack us. Allies or not, I do not plan to lose you ever again."

"I think we could easily hide from the tribes," smiled Xavo as he thought about the Valley of the Ram. "I do have experience dealing with them. They are rather superstitious. Let's ride on and try to find a better vantage point so we can know for sure who it is."

Xavo led the way up the gentle slope of the foothills. He occasionally turned to gaze upon the column creating the dust cloud, but he could not identify them. As the sun began to sink towards the western horizon, they came to a large, flat clearing. Xavo halted and studied the area. A large, circular fire ring sat in the center of the clearing, and ruts created by wagon wheels marred the soil. While Lady Mystic waited, Xavo left the clearing on a narrow trail that angled back along a ridge. The trail ended abruptly at the edge of a cliff. Xavo stared down at the trail they had traveled earlier. He smiled broadly as his eyes saw the caravan heading up the foothill. He turned and rode back to the clearing.

"It is indeed a Motangan caravan," announced Xavo, "a large one in fact. Must be at least twenty wagons."

"And soldiers?" asked Lady Mystic.

"I could not see well enough to count them," answered Xavo, "but at least a hundred. I suspect that they will stop for the night in this clearing. It appears to have been used for such a purpose before."

"How much time do we have?" asked Lady Mystic.

"A couple of hours," smiled Xavo. "What are you thinking?"

"We have time to plan a few surprises for the Motangans," grinned Lady Mystic.

"Indeed we do," chuckled Xavo. "Dismount. I will lead the horses away from here so that they do not give us away."

Lady Mystic slid off the horse and walked around the clearing, imagining where the wagons would rest for the night and where the solders would sleep. When Xavo returned, she was sitting on a log staring at the fire ring.

"What are you dreaming up?" Xavo asked.

"Nothing fancy," smiled Lady Mystic. "Oh, I did let my imagination run wild for a time, but I think simplicity will accomplish the goal easier. We will each take a different side of the campground. I will draw their attention to the fire ring and then we strike them

down. If I am correct in my assumptions, we can spare the horses. They should be well enough away from the soldiers."

"I will take the western side of the camp," nodded Xavo. "I want to watch them approach."

Lady Mystic nodded and Xavo disappeared along the trail leading to the ridge. He found a safe hiding spot and watched the trail leading up the slope. A little over an hour later, the caravan came into view. He counted two dozen wagons. After the caravan passed below his hiding spot, Xavo remained hidden but kept his ears cocked to hear the sounds of the camp being set up. Two hours later he heard the call whispered in his ear.

"It is show time," Lady Mystic said softly. "Work your way towards the camp."

Xavo moved silently along the trail and waited behind a tree where he had a good view of the Motangan camp. The fire ring was indeed the center of the camp, but soldiers were also fairly far away from it. He wondered what his lover had in mind.

Unexpectedly, a large cloud of smoke rose from the campfire. Several soldiers shouted in alarm. When everyone's attention was focused on the fire ring, an image suddenly appeared. It was an image of Emperor Vand and his daughter, flames leaping up from their feet.

"Emperor Vand commands your attention," the image of Lady Mystic announced loudly. "Gather around and hear his words."

Xavo stood poised to strike as the Motangans began to gather around the fire ring. None of them appeared eager to get too close, but Lady Mystic spoke again and ordered them to crowd around the fire. Over a hundred Motangans crammed together as ordered by the emperor's daughter, the heat of the fire causing the soldiers to sweat. Vand appeared to be waiting silently for each and every soldier to be prepared to listen.

"Kneel," commanded Lady Mystic.

The soldiers immediately knelt, their perspiring faces upturned in anticipation. Light blades suddenly flew from the east side of the camp. Xavo immediately joined the slaughter with light blades of his own. The light blades sliced through the ranks of kneeling soldiers, sending body parts flying into the flames. Wave after wave of light blades soared into the kneeling soldiers as both mages cast their spells as quickly as they could. In seconds it was over, and the image winked out of existence. The mages walked out of their concealment and met in the clearing.

"The illusion was a nice diversion," complimented Xavo.

"The illusion was the only fun part of the task," frowned Lady Mystic. "It was too easy. Seeing my father's men behave as they did, like obedient slaves, makes me realize how foolish I have been with

my life. Not long ago I might have behaved just as they did, never questioning, never wondering. If nothing else," she vowed, "I shall never behave like a slave again."

"You were never a slave," Xavo responded. "You were the emperor's daughter."

"All of Vand's people were slaves," retorted Lady Mystic. "The only difference is that some of them realized it, while the others thought that they had free will. We were all slaves in the end."

Chapter 29

Defense of Khadora

The dawn broke to a beautifully clear sky. The mages atop the peaks of the Bear Mountains in Khadora sent in their reports on the location of the Motangan army on the other side of the river. Inside the cavernous ore mines at Deep Bend, the armies of the southern frontier clans sharpened their blades and readied their mounts in anticipation of a day of deadly battle. Over thirty clans were represented, but the armies were all following the lead of Lord Marshal Yenga of the Torak clan. The lords of the various clans gathered near the main entrance to the mine.

"You would never suspect that the morning had arrived," remarked Lord Shamino of the Sorgan clan. "It is always nighttime in the bowels of this mountain. How do the miners survive in such gloominess?"

Lord Sevrin glanced briefly at the dim torch-lit cavern and tunnels and ignored the remark. "What are the reports from above?" he asked Yenga.

"Our time has arrived," Yenga told the assembled lords. "Motanga scouts have just left the riverbank across from us. I am sure that they will report no activity to alarm Premer Shamal. It is time for us to cross the river."

"Won't the Motangans see us crossing?" worried Lord Burdine of the Litari clan. "Our losses would be grave indeed."

"They will not see us cross," promised Lord Marshal Yenga. "The trail northward swings far away from the riverbank at this point. I was not even sure that Shamal would send scouts to check it out, but now that he has, he will not repeat the exercise. I am sure he was only checking to make sure that no straggling Khadorans were hiding there. Our attack on his left flank will be totally unexpected."

"You haven't said how we are going to cross the river," frowned Lord Shamino. "The bridges have all been destroyed, and there is not a ford within a hundred leagues."

"That is why the attack will be such a surprise," grinned Yenga. "Come outside with me and see how we will cross the river."

The gathered lords followed Lord Marshal Yenga out of the mouth of the mine. They gazed down the slope at the river, which made a dramatic turn to the north. At the foot of the mountain was a large harbor filled with barges. The barges used to haul ore downstream

were not the normal Khadoran clan barges. They were huge barges that dwarfed all other river vessels. As the lords watched, a group of Khadoran miners operated a monstrous winch at the upstream limit of the harbor. Slowly a long, encrusted chain began to appear from the murky depths of the river.

"What in blazes is that?" asked Lord Sydar.

"It is a safety chain that stretches to the opposite bank of the river," grinned Yenga. "There are times when the mine must close the river to navigation. The mine barges are so large that they present quite a danger to river traffic, especially with the sharp bend in the river at this point. Vessels coming downstream cannot see when the mine barges are being launched. If only one or two mine barges are entering the river, the chain is not used, but occasionally, the mine needs to send a dozen barges at once. When that happens, they close the river with the chain. The chain halts vessels coming downstream. It does not happen often, but it is preferable to the deadly collisions that occurred before its use."

"So we are closing the river," frowned Lord Sevrin. "Why? There is not likely to be any traffic this day. Everything upstream has already been destroyed to deny the enemy food. There is no reason for any barges to be coming along."

"Quite true," nodded Yenga as the chain to the opposite shore fully emerged. "We are not using the chain to close the river today. We are using it to cross the river. Watch."

As the lords watched with curiosity, one of the huge barges was attached to the chain with large metal hooks. The crew of the barge pulled on the chain to move the barge across the river. Before the barge was even clear of the harbor, the next barge was attached to the chain and followed the first.

"They are crossing the river using the chain," frowned Lord Sydar, "but why not take troops with them? I do not understand."

"They are not just crossing the river," grinned Lord Shamino as the third barge attached to the chain. "They are creating a bridge for our men to ride across."

"Exactly," nodded Lord Marshal Yenga. "When the last of the barges is attached to the chain, we will have a bridge of barges stretching from one shore to the other. Sheets of metal will bridge the gaps between the barges. All of our men will then cross over and prepare for a flanking attack on the Motangans."

"Clever," Lord Sevrin remarked with approval. "How long has this plan been in place?"

"It was discussed months ago," answered Lord Marshal Yenga, "but we didn't know that we would use it until last week. A lot depended on what the Motangans did during the invasion. Emperor

Marak has alternative plans for each route the Motangans might take."

* * *

High on the peaks of the Three Sisters, Emperor Marak sat with the tribal leaders of the Chula. He gazed across the valley of the Khadoran River and nodded in satisfaction.

"The frontier tribes are crossing the river," declared the Torak. "It is time for the Chula to descend out of the mountains and take their place in the forests on the Motangan's eastern flank."

Tmundo, the leader of the Kywara tribe, nodded and rose to issue the orders. He walked over the peak and disappeared. Within minutes he returned and sat alongside the Torak. He gazed up at the clear morning sky.

"This signal that we are to await," he asked the Torak, "is there any chance that we might confuse it with something else?"

"It will be unmistakable," smiled Marak. "Everyone between Sintula and Chantise will know that the battle is to begin."

"Including the Motangans?" asked Axor.

"Including them," nodded Marak. "While they may not know the forces arrayed against them, they will know that they are expected to begin fighting."

"Will we know when to break off the attack as well?" asked Ukaro.

"There will be no retreat from this battle," stated the emperor. "This is the final battle for Khadora. At the end of this day, only one side will remain alive."

"Isn't that a dangerous statement to make?" frowned Tmundo. "If things do not go well, it would be foolish to continue making a stand here when we can regroup and try again."

"It is dangerous," agreed the Torak, "but it is also a confident statement. The Motangans will be surrounded and attacked without mercy. They must not be allowed to survive and endanger yet more of Khadora. We cannot afford to burn more fields to deny them food for we will have no food for ourselves. This is where Premer Shamal must fall."

The Chula did not respond, and the Torak rose and stretched. He smiled confidently at the leaders and then walked over the peak. Myka was waiting anxiously when he arrived.

"To battle?" asked the dragon.

"Soon, winged warrior," replied the Torak as he climbed the dragon's back and sat down. "First we must visit the armies of the Imperial Valley. Fly hidden, for I am not ready for the Motangans to see you."

The dragon leaped into the air and glided down the eastern slopes of the Three Sisters. She soared just over the tops of the trees until the

Charl River came into view. Banking sharply, the dragon turned westward to skirt around the Three Sisters and approach the large defensive works from the north.

Marak smiled subconsciously as he saw the thousands of Khadorans assembled north of the giant berm. There were shouts and waves from the armies of the Imperial Valley as the dragon skimmed over their heads. At the base of the berm, a large clearing opened up as soldiers were instructed to create a place for the dragon to land.

"I could have created my own clearing," quipped the dragon.

"You will have your fill of humans before this day is out," the Torak replied seriously. "Conserve your energy. The battle will begin soon enough."

Myka realized that the time for humor had not yet come. She remained silent as she landed in the improvised clearing. The soldiers surrounding the clearing looked on in a combination of fear and admiration as the Torak slid to the ground and walked towards the berm. Myka could not resist winking at the soldiers and then letting out a fiery belch. She laughed when the soldiers scurried backwards to put more distance between the dragon and themselves. Marak climbed the earthworks to one of the viewing places where the members of the Lords' Council were assembled. He nodded appreciatively at the rows of archers manning the crude wall.

"Welcome," Lord Chenowith called out as the emperor approached. "Has the time arrived?"

"Soon," nodded Marak as he walked into the circle of lords. "The vanguard of the Motangan force will arrive shortly. Is everything ready for them?"

"We are ready," assured Lord Patel. "Mages will erect a magical defense while the archers skewer the vanguard."

"We have constructed catapults to turn the forest into a furnace," added Lord Quilo.

"Do not use fire at the outset," warned Emperor Marak. "This fortification was designed to be held for a long time. Let the enemy come to us and die before this bulwark. A forest fire could well endanger our own forces, but we will use it if we have to."

"The area before this berm is well cleared," frowned Lord Faliman. "The fire could not spread to our men."

"We are not the only army attacking the Motangans on this day," explained the Torak. "The clans of the southern frontier, the Chula, and the elves are with us. The Motangans will be surrounded."

"Mercy!" exclaimed Lord Kiamesh. "You had not mentioned all of this before."

"I was not assured that all of the pieces would come together," shrugged the Torak. "Now I am. The southern tribes have crossed the

river at Deep Bend, and the elves crossed at Sintula. The Chula are right now descending out of the Three Sisters. There will be many of our brothers in the forests before you. We will not use fire unless our position is about to be lost."

"Here they come!" shouted a lookout.

Marak and the lords gazed over the top of the berm and saw the vanguard of the Motangan army exiting the forest trail. The Motangans halted when they saw the huge earthworks. After a short pause, a Motangan officer ordered his men to spread out across the cleared area. They made no attempt to approach the berm, although they were already within bow range. Marak grinned as he tried to imagine what must have been going through the officer's mind.

"Let them spread out a bit," Marak said softly. "We don't want only the archers in the center of the berm to have targets."

The berm and the clearing before it spread for over a league from the foot of the Three Sisters to the Khadora River. For many minutes the Motangans filed out of the woods and spread to the left and the right as they hugged the wall of trees before the clearing. Before long, thousands of Motangan soldiers stood staring at the earthen wall, waiting for the signal to attack.

"Now," Marak said softly to the air mages behind the lords.

Dozens of voices spoke into air tunnels, and the air immediately sizzled with Khadoran arrows. Screams rippled through the Motangan ranks as red-clad soldiers fell to the ground. Some of the Motangans charged towards the mammoth berm while others retreated into the forest. Those who charged the Khadorans were quickly cut down, but other Motangans were still filing into the cleared area.

A Motangan black-cloak exited the forest and glanced at the massacre for only a moment before raising his arm and sending a fireball streaming towards the Khadorans. The fireball hit a magical shield and dissipated. His arm rose again and pointed at a different area of the berm, but an arrow pierced his chest before he could get the spell off.

"Did you see that?" Lord Jamarat asked excitedly. "Their magic is worthless."

"Do not believe that," retorted the Torak. "The magical shields can only do so much. None of the Motangan magical projectiles will strike our people, but there are other spells that the enemy can use. I fully expect them to cause the ground to tremble with earthquakes. Our shields will not save us against that kind of magic."

"What will save us from such spells?" asked Lord Quilo.

"Killing the remaining black cloaks," answered the emperor. "Our mages destroyed most of the Motangan mages at the third trench, but we must ensure that the rest of them die before they can summon up

such magic. They are the highest priority targets for our archers and mages alike."

"I will see to it," offered Lord Kiamesh as he waved an air mage towards him.

"When the Motangans stop coming out of the woods," Marak continued, "our cavalries must pursue them. That will be the deadliest time for our forces."

"You expect them to halt the attack?" asked Lord Chenowith.

"Eventually," nodded Marak. "I don't suspect that Premer Shamal is in the vanguard. When he hears what is happening here, he will order the attack to halt. He will seek a way around the berm."

"But there is no way around the berm," frowned Lord Patel.

"He will not be aware of that," replied the Torak. "It is at that moment that our other forces must attack. Be prepared for it. You will see my signal to our other forces. If the Motangans are still attacking here, there should be no change in your defense at that time, but if the Motangans have halted their attack, that will be the time to pursue them with vigor."

"You are leaving then?" frowned Lord Faliman.

"I am," Marak nodded. "I am taking Myka aloft to observe the battle from the sky. As long as I am visible, your mages will be able to contact me."

The Torak turned and left the group of lords. He hurried down the embankment and climbed aboard the dragon.

"Fly high, winged warrior," instructed the Torak. "Let's see what the enemy is up to."

"About time," quipped Myka as she leaped into the air. "Waiting on the ground while the enemy attacks is not what I am interested in."

Marak merely smiled as the dragon's wings began to beat powerfully. In moments the berm had faded to a small line stretching between the mountains and the river. The Torak gazed down at the road through the forest. His eyes scanned the stream of red uniforms in search of the Motangan premer.

The Motangans had very few horses among their troops. Most of the horses were used to haul the supply wagons at the rear of the column, but officers also utilized horses to avoid walking with their men. Emperor Marak had little trouble finding the premer. With about one third of the Motangan army before him, Premer Shamal rode in a knot of other officers. Marak smiled and instructed the dragon to circle while he wove an air tunnel towards the premer. For several minutes there was no conversation to listen to, only the sounds of an army marching to war. Suddenly someone noticed the dragon high overhead. A few black-cloaks tried to send magical projectiles skyward to strike the dragon, but Myka was flying too high. She belched long

flames in defiance, but the Motangan mages soon gave up.

"We need a way to kill that dragon," came a voice through the air tunnel. "That is probably Emperor Marak riding it. Kill them both and this war is over."

"You are correct as usual, General Chen," came a second voce, which Marak assumed was Premer Shamal's voice by the authoritative tone used to address the general, "but it is too high at the moment. I wonder what he is up to?"

"He is probably checking out the size of our remaining force," offered General Chen. "He killed many of our men at Sintula and is probably hoping to do the same at Chantise. We must find a better way across the river this time."

"We will," assured the premer. "With Sintula behind us, we can safely report our progress to Vand. I doubt that he will quibble if we take a couple of days taking the city of Chantise. It will give our men some rest and lessen our losses."

Marak smiled as the premer validated the Torak's own thoughts about the Motangan strategy, but the smile faded as an officer arrived from the front. He listened carefully to the report.

"The Khadorans have not retreated to Chantise," reported the officer. "We are being attacked well before the city. They have built a huge fortification across the road. Our men cannot reach it under the hail of Khadoran arrows."

"What type of fortification?" asked Shamal.

"A large earthen berm," answered the officer. "It stretches over a league with a swath of cleared area before it. The entire cleared area is within Khadoran bow range."

"What are my officers doing about it?" asked the premer.

"We are attacking it," answered the officer, "but the men are cut down before they can reach it. The entire berm is manned with Khadoran archers. I would like to halt the attack until we can figure a way around the berm."

A long silence filled the air tunnel, and Marak was afraid that he had moved it too far from the premer, but the voices soon returned.

"We will need siege engines built," declared Premer Shamal. "I want the attack to continue, but slow down the rate of soldiers pouring into the cleared area. I want to keep the Khadorans busy and make them think that we will just continue the attack. Build the siege engines beyond the sight of the berm. Also have every mage left moved to the front."

"Our mages are ineffective," reported the officer. "There is a magical shield protecting the Khadoran archers."

"Instruct them to forget about the archers," scowled the premer. "They are to concentrate on destroying the fortification. If it is made

of dirt, let the mages return it to the ground."

The officer acknowledged his orders and headed towards the front. Only a short silence followed before General Chen spoke.

"Why continue the attack?" asked the general. "We will just be throwing soldiers to the Khadorans. Why not halt the attack and save the men until we are ready?"

"The Khadorans will not let us halt the attack," answered the premer. "If our men stop entering the clearing, the Khadoran cavalry will attack. If we allow that to happen, we will never get any siege engines built."

"But our men can defend the road while the catapults are built," countered General Chen.

"Our men will not be able to move out of the way of the attacking horsemen," retorted the premer. "This roadway is much too narrow. If our men clear off the road and into the surrounding forests, they will leave the road open to the Khadoran cavalry. Do you want to face their horsemen back here in the middle of the column?"

"No," agreed General Chen. "I see the wisdom in your orders, but perhaps there is a way around this berm."

"Perhaps," nodded the premer, "but I am not hopeful for such a solution. Ask yourself why the Khadorans have chosen to make a stand along this road instead of retreating to Chantise as we expected them to."

"Because there is no way around it," conceded the general. "If they have planned their defense so well, then might not we expect them to foil your plan for siege engines?"

"An excellent thought," agreed the premer. "That is what is puzzling me. Are they just trying to slow down our march on Chantise? Or is there something more sinister in the works?"

"What could they do other than slow us down?" questioned the general.

"We are already slowed down," replied the general as he gazed upward at the dragon. "This column is almost at a halt and that worries me. Our maps of Khadora are fairly good, and I cannot imagine the advantage of choosing this road to defend unless the Khadorans are sure that we will not decide to cross the Khadoran River. Have we sent scouts towards the river?"

"They went out early this morning," nodded the general. "There is no one hiding out there waiting to attack our flank. The Three Sisters cover our other flank. No Khadoran horsemen are going to cross those peaks."

"Then we should expect an attack from our rear," stated the premer.

"What makes you say that?" asked the general. "The Khadoran

armies are all ahead of us."

"Not all of them," argued the premer. "Do not forget the frontier clans."

"Those clans are not something to fear," balked the general. "All put together, the frontier clans can hardly make up one tenth of our size. Such an attack would be suicidal, and the Khadorans value life far too much for that kind of offensive."

"You are right," sighed Shamal, "but my gut tells me that we are missing something. The Khadorans have been full of surprises since this war began. I cannot help feeling that we are falling into another trap."

"I will send out more scouts," offered General Chen. "That will ease your worries. I think the Khadorans are just buying time to create a better defense of Chantise."

"Perhaps," mused the premer, "but send out the scouts regardless of your beliefs."

The Torak knew what the new scouts would discover. He could not afford to allow that to happen. Raising his arm high, Marak cast a spell. A projectile of light shot from his fingertips and rose upward. The ball of light streaked towards the heavens and exploded in a frenzy of light. Long golden streaks flew out in every direction and plummeted slowly towards the ground. It was a sight that could be easily viewed hundreds of leagues away. Shamal and Chen immediately looked up at the dragon.

"My gut feeling is overriding your assurances that this is only a delaying tactic," snapped Premer Shamal. "Get those scouts out now."

Chapter 30

Roadway of Death

The elves had been following the Motangan column in Khadora. They had kept off the road and had moved silently through the forest. When the sky was illuminated by the Torak's spell, King Avalar used an air tunnel to instruct his warriors. The elves moved quickly northward, their first targets being the supply wagons at the end of the column. The drivers and escorts were killed and the driverless wagons were used to block the roadway.

Shouts arose from the column ahead of the wagons as the Motangans became aware of the new threat from behind. Some of the Motangans tried to press forward, but the whole column was barely moving. There was little room for the soldiers to move forward. Other Motangans turned to attack the elves. Two groups of elves moved forward. One group led by King Avalar moved through the forests along the east side of the roadway while the other group was led by Princess Alastasia and took the west side of the road. Together they moved forward as one army.

The Motangans were no match for the elven archers. Most of them died before they ever saw an elf. Within minutes the Motangans were panicking. They began to shout and push forward even though there was no room for them on the road. They fled into the forest on both sides of the road and ran towards the north to escape their unseen enemy. As King Avalar and his daughter pushed onward, the rear of the Motangan column fled in full rout. The elves followed as quickly as they could nock arrows.

* * *

The Chula were spread out in a long line flanking the right-hand side of the center of the Motangan column. When the Torak's signal was seen, they moved silently forward. No orders were necessary as each Chula tribe was led by the leader of the tribe, and each tribe acted independently. Spears flew into the unsuspecting Motangans, and light blades decimated the foreigners. The Motangans could neither advance nor retreat along the clogged roadway. Many of them stood to fight, but more fled into the forest west of the roadway. Their reprieve from battle was short-lived, and their retreat turned deadly. The armies of the frontier clans occupied the left-hand flank of the Motangans, and the Khadorans moved forward to engage the center of the column. Within an hour of fierce fighting, the center of the

Motangan column ceased to exist.

The Chula split into two groups. One group advanced along the flank towards the berm while the other advanced towards the elves. The frontier clans did likewise, and soon the Motangan column was being squeezed into two distinct columns, each caught between two armies. The Torak watched the battle from the sky as Myka circled over Premer Shamal. He maintained an air tunnel to listen in on the premer's conversations.

"We are being attacked from the rear," reported an officer. Our supplies are gone, and the elves are advancing at a furious pace."

"Elves?" balked Premer Shamal. "That is preposterous. Who told you this?"

"A mage told me," replied the officer. "He said he received a message from the rear. I thought you should know."

"There are no elves in Khadora," interjected General Chen. "The mage must have misunderstood the message."

A black cloak suddenly appeared alongside the premer. "It is true," he insisted. "I also received the message. I do not know where the elves came from, but he would not have been specific if he was not sure."

"Contact him again," ordered Shamal. "I want to be positive that elves are attacking us."

"He no longer answers the call," frowned the mage. "In fact, I cannot contact anyone back there."

"Then go back there yourself," snapped he premer. "I want information."

"There is more," frowned the mage. "Our column is being attacked in the center. We are under attack from both flanks."

"By elves again?" scowled the premer.

"No," the mage shook his head. "There are no reports of elves on our flanks, but there are many mages among the enemy. Our losses are high."

"Your gut feeling was correct," interjected General Chen. "What are your orders, Shamal?"

Marak looked back towards the berm and saw the Khadoran cavalry surging over the earthworks. He nodded in satisfaction and dropped the air tunnel. The time for listening was over, for he did not intend to give Premer Shamal the chance to reorganize his forces. The Torak shouted terse instructions to Myka, and the dragon suddenly leaned into a steep dive.

As the ground came rushing up towards Marak, he focused on the black-cloak talking to Premer Shamal. The Torak's arm pointed downward, and a pulse of power soared from his fist. Even before the magical projectile struck, Marak followed with a series of light blades.

The force bolt slammed into the Motangan mage, splitting his body in two. Premer Shamal and the officers surrounding him looked upward a second before the light blades hit. The magical blades ripped into the clump of officers with deadly results, officers and horses reduced to mere fragments that flew in every direction.

Myka suddenly flared her wings and soared northward just over the heads of the column of Motangan soldiers. Flames shot from her mouth and scorched the mass of red uniforms. Marak scanned the roadway ahead and searched for black-cloaks. Whenever he saw one, he unleashed a light blade at the mage. Within minutes the dragon rose over the heads of the charging Khadoran cavalry. She banked sharply and prepared for another pass over the roadway.

On her first pass, the Motangans were taken completely by surprise. The soldiers never saw the dragon coming, but those who survived her flames saw the dragon after she passed over them. The second pass was more dangerous. Flying into the faces of the Motangan soldiers, Myka had to deal with hastily aimed arrows streaking towards her. The arrows bounced off the armor-plated dragon, but a lone mage managed to strike with a fireball shortly before Marak struck the black-cloak with a light blade.

Myka banked sharply to her right and skimmed over the trees. Marak jammed a knife into the dragon's scales and hung on as Myka dove for the Khadora River. The dragon slid into the river, splashing water high into the air. She skimmed along the surface of the water for a short distance and then climbed into the air again.

"Are you alright?" the Torak asked with concern.

"I am now," replied Myka. "That fireball hit me just right. It managed to slip under the scales. Did you get him?"

"He is dead," answered the Torak.

"Good," snorted Myka. "Let's get the rest of them. Pay close attention to the mages."

Myka swept over the trees between the river and the roadway, banking sharply to soar over the road once again. Motangan bodies littered the road, and the winged warrior dropped lower. She impaled two soldiers with her claws as her mouth belched fire. The Torak tossed light blades before the dragon's path as Myka tossed the captured bodies to the ground. Motangan arrows flew out of the woods towards Marak and the dragon, but Myka sped by too quickly to be hit by anyone on the sidelines. After several minutes of flying over the road, they came to a section of the roadway where nothing lived. Motangan bodies still covered the roadway, but there were no survivors to aim at.

"This must be the center of the column," shouted the Torak. "The flanking attacks have taken their toll."

“Then it is time to aid the elves,” snorted the dragon. “You have a minute to rest yourself.”

The trees raced past the tips of Myka’s wings as she sped swiftly along the desolate road, her eyes focused far ahead at the figures still alive. Long tongues of flame shot from her mouth and her claws stretched forward as the Motangans came into view. Some of the Motangans saw the winged warrior coming. A few fled into the trees despite the presence of Chula and frontier Khadorans. Others stood their ground and raised bows to attack the dragon. Marak’s light blades preceded the dragon, shredding bodies and clouding the air with a red mist, and soon the Motangans were in a full-panic retreat.

The panic spread in a wave as the dragon flew into the fleeing soldiers, again impaling some and tossing their bodies aside. A haze of smoke began to appear over the roadway behind the winged warrior as the dragon’s flames ignited bodies and body parts. Within minutes Myka saw the abandoned wagons of the supply train and soared upwards. She was about to bank for another run when the Torak spoke.

“Take us high,” ordered the emperor. “I am feeling drained, and I wish to see the state of the battlefield.”

Myka responded without comment and flew upward, far beyond the reach of arrow or magical projectile. From his high vantage point, the Torak gazed down at the roadway of death. The road was covered in red. Blood flowed freely among the uniforms of the dead Motangans, but few soldiers moved along the road. It was a desolate graveyard for the invaders.

“Where are the surviving Motangans?” Marak asked as they flew over the road. “I cannot see them.”

“There are still battles raging in the trees,” replied Myka, “of course I would not expect a human’s eyes to see what I can see. The rats have cleared off the road for now. It is a pity. I was looking forward to another run along the road.”

“Can you see any problem areas?” asked the Torak.

Myka did not answer promptly. She flew the entire length of the road and turned over the berm for another run. When she reached the southern end of the road, she turned again and spoke.

“The battle is won,” the dragon declared. “The Motangans are seeking to flee rather than fight.”

“And there is nowhere for them to run,” nodded Emperor Marak. “Praise Kaltara for this victory.”

“And what comes next?” asked the winged warrior.

“Fakara and Vand,” replied Marak. “I wonder how things are going there?”

* * *

“There is a wide pass through the mountains,” Bakhai said to Premer Cardijja. “We will pass through it tomorrow.”

“And what is on the other side?” asked the premer.

“A wide plain,” answered Bakhai. “On the other side of the plain is a jungle.”

“And that is where Angragar is located?” asked General Luggar.

“I do not know,” frowned Bakhai. “I do not even know if Angragar really exists, but that is where I was traveling when the evil spirit began chasing me. She must be protecting something.”

“I agree,” smiled Premer Cardijja. “There was a fork in the road not long ago. Where does the northern fork lead to?”

“To the Valley of Bones,” Bakhai answered without hesitation. “It is a large valley protected by four great peaks. It is said that ancient armies used it as a fortress.”

“That might be where the free tribes are hiding,” General Luggar commented with excitement. “Perhaps we should go there instead.”

“The free tribes are not there,” Bakhai replied quickly.

“How do you know?” the general frowned with skepticism.

“Everyone knows,” shrugged Bakhai. “The free tribes are far to the south. Their homes are along the Taggot River.”

“Show me on the map,” ordered Premer Cardijja.

Bakhai walked over to the map and stared at it for a moment. He appeared to be confused by the strange symbols, but he finally pointed at the large peninsula that occupied southeast Fakara.

“The Taggot River runs down the center,” Bakhai said softly. “It starts in the center of the Giaming Mountains and empties into the sea. That is where the free tribes live.”

The premer smiled broadly and nodded in appreciation of the knowledge. He cast a smug glance at General Luggar.

“So which way do we go?” asked the general. “Do we search this jungle for Angragar? Or do we alter course and march on the free tribes?”

“The distance to the free tribes is great,” mused the premer. “I think our priority should be to find Angragar. The Fakarans will remain trapped on the peninsula. We can choose our time to turn southward and trap them between our armies and the sea. I have suddenly begun to feel very optimistic about this campaign.”

General Luggar glanced at Bakhai and frowned. Premer Cardijja noticed the glance and shook his head.

“Go outside and play, Bakhai,” the premer said in a friendly manner. “I will call for you if we need to talk more.”

Bakhai smiled and nodded. He moved eagerly to the tent flap and let himself out. Premer Cardijja shook his head once more and turned his gaze upon General Luggar.

“You still do not trust the lad?” he asked.

“I do not trust any Fakaran,” shrugged the general. “It is one thing to ask questions of the captive, but quite another to reveal your thoughts to him.”

“His information has been accurate in every regard,” the premer defended Bakhai. “We could never have progressed so far without his help. We would still be blindly searching for a pass through the mountains.”

“The roads were easy enough to spot,” retorted the general. “I am sure that our scouts would have found them.”

“We were too far north to find this pass,” countered the premer. “I will grant you that we might have found the Valley of Bones, but we would probably have missed the jungle that lies ahead. I wonder if the jungle is large enough to conceal the lost city?”

“It is probably similar to the jungles on Motanga,” offered General Luggar. “It is most likely a small strip along the coast.”

“Is it?” questioned the premer. “Bakhai says that we will reach the jungle in two days, yet we cannot be close to the coast. I am imagining a much larger jungle than on the Island of Darkness.”

“Perhaps,” shrugged General Luggar. “What did you make of his description of the Valley of Bones?”

“The name is strange,” mused the premer, “but it is worth checking out. Should the free tribes move northward, we could use it as a place to defend. I do not care to be caught on the plain with horsemen charging my position. I saw what the Fakaran horsemen are capable of in such a situation. It cost me fifty thousand men.”

“Yet we are heading for a plain tomorrow,” cautioned the general.

“It must be crossed to get to the jungle,” retorted the premer. “We will only spend two days at most upon it. Once we gain the safety of the jungle, the Fakaran horsemen will lose their advantage.”

“Then you were wise to order an early halt to today’s march,” noted the general. “The men should be well rested in case there is trouble in the next two days.”

“You worry too much,” replied the premer. “I am feeling very good about things right now. Go and get some rest yourself, Luggar. Tomorrow we will tread on uncharted Fakaran land.”

Bakhai heard the general preparing to leave the tent. He quickly dropped his air tunnel and picked up a stick. He started drawing in the dirt as the general left the premer’s tent. Luggar hardly glanced at the lad as he headed for his own tent. Bakhai smiled inwardly and rose from the ground. He walked through the large camp towards the east and settled on the ground not far from the sentries manning the perimeter.

Over the past few days, the Fakaran lad had become a familiar sight to the sentries. They even nodded to him in a friendly manner when he arrived each evening. Bakhai stretched out on the ground facing east and appeared to be resting and watching the sentries. After his daily arrival, the sentries paid no attention to him. Bakhai wove an air tunnel to a position one league to the east. He spoke softly, his voice no more than a whisper to himself.

"I told them that the free tribes are far to the south along the Taggot River," reported Bakhai. "I also said that the Valley of Bones was uninhabited and would make a good defensive position."

"Any reactions to your information?" asked the Qubari shaman.

"There was a discussion on searching for Angragar or heading south to battle the free tribes," answered Bakhai. "The premer has decided to pursue the location of Angragar."

"Well done," replied the shaman. "Be forewarned," he continued. "The Motangans will be attacked tomorrow. Perhaps you should escape during the night. Do you need a diversion, or can you escape on your own?"

"I cannot leave," replied Bakhai. "If I fled tonight, General Luggar would suspect an attack tomorrow. He is still suspicious of me."

"He will be more than suspicious after the attack," warned the shaman. "You must flee."

"No," Bakhai said adamantly after a long pause. "There is more that I can do to affect the outcome of tomorrow's battle."

"What can you possibly do, brother of the Astor?" asked the shaman. "Flee while it is safe to do so. Tomorrow night your life will most certainly be forfeit."

Bakhai dropped the air tunnel and fell silent as he thought about the shaman's question. He knew that prudence required that he escape before morning, but he also knew that such a maneuver would cost the free tribes greatly. General Luggar would certainly demand defensive procedures that would result in many Fakarans dying needlessly. Bakhai rose quietly and returned to the premer's tent. He stretched out alongside the tent and fell asleep.

Bakhai awoke shortly after the sun had set. He sat up and let his eyes rove over the encampment. Campfires glowed as the sky darkened, and the stars began to appear. The Fakaran spy sat silently and watched the Motangans eat and prepare for a night's sleep. For several hours, Bakhai did not move. As the night progressed, the Motangans retired for the night. Only a few soldiers moved within the camp near the premer's tent, but Bakhai knew that the perimeter would be ringed with sentries. They were not his concern at the moment.

Bakhai wove an air tunnel and directed it to the east. He did not

however extend it the normal one league, but rather shortened it to a distance halfway between the premer's tent and the perimeter. Bakhai's mouth moved as he slowly turned the air tunnel clockwise around the camp. He was not concerned about the black-cloaks intercepting his air tunnel, as the sounds emitted out of Bakhai's mouth would be unintelligible to the Motangan mages. The sounds, however, were understood clearly by the insects living within the camp. Throughout the camp, millions of ants and spiders began moving. They swarmed over the sleeping bodies, biting and stinging as they went.

The Motangan encampment came alive with shouts and curses from every quadrant. The men inside tents came storming out, stamping their feet on the ground and dancing around like drunken fools at an all night festival. Those who slept outdoors were rolling on the ground and swatting their bodies to rid themselves of the insects. Campfires surged anew as soldiers gathered in the light to inspect each other's bodies and remove the biting insects.

Within an hour the encampment grew quiet. Bakhai heard soldiers complaining about welts on their skin and terrible itching, but eventually everyone returned to sleep. Bakhai waited until the encampment was quiet and then repeated his call to the insects. Once again the little creatures swarmed out of their hiding places and struck the Motangan soldiers.

Bakhai reclined and feigned sleep as Premer Cardijja came storming out of his tent. The Fakaran spy had exempted the large tent from his orders to the insects so that he would not be bitten himself. This exception spared the Motangan premer from the uncomfortable surprise, but he glowered at the state of his encampment. Cardijja began shouting orders in an attempt to regain control over the soldiers, but it was a futile gesture. The soldiers ran around trying to rid themselves of the tiny bugs. Once again Bakhai let the camp quiet down.

Premer Cardijja returned to the comfort of the large tent, and Bakhai sat up again. He smiled inwardly as he thought of a variation to the attack. His third call went out to the snakes and reptiles. Within moments thousands of slithering beasts invaded the encampment. Again the shouts and curses split the air, and Premer Cardijja was quick to appear. He looked over at Bakhai questioningly.

"What in the world is going on?" he snapped.

"I do not know," frowned Bakhai. "I was awakened by loud screaming. Are we under attack?"

"It is snakes and lizards," a nearby officer reported. "This land is cursed."

"Nonsense," bellowed the premer, although Bakhai could sense

uncertainty in the man's voice.

The officer turned and ran off to help his men. Premer Cardijja turned to Bakhai once again.

"Have you ever heard of such things around here?" he asked.

"There are occasional insect plagues," nodded Bakhai, "but they are a rare occurrence. They are only ants and spiders and will not really hurt anyone, but the snakes and lizards I have never heard of before. Perhaps the insects disturbed them, and they are trying to get away. At least they do not seem to be affecting us," he added with a smile.

The Motangan premer shook his head as he gazed at his soldiers in disgust. He stormed back in his tent. Bakhai grinned inwardly and watched the soldiers. He knew that he should not repeat the call a fourth time, but he was pleased to see that it would be unnecessary in any event. The Motangan soldiers were not returning to sleep. They gathered in groups around the campfires and smoked and drank coffee. Bakhai was smiling as he let himself drift off to sleep.

When morning came, Bakhai sat up and gazed around the encampment. Many of the soldiers were in the same spots that they had occupied when Bakhai closed his eyes. He listened intently to the conversations of passing soldiers and learned that the camp had been awake the whole night. Many of the men sported dozens of welts, and all of them were scratching some part of their body.

When Premer Cardijja emerged from his tent and ordered the camp struck, cheers rang among the soldiers. They eagerly donned their packs and collapsed their tents, spending extra time to inspect each for any hidden threats. Within a couple of hours, the Motangan army was marching eastward through the pass between the Bone Mountains and the Giaming Mountains.

Bakhai's eyes scanned the plain the moment it came into view. He looked for any sign of the free tribes, but he could see none. By high sun the army was through the pass and marching across the open plain. Bakhai kept looking for any sign of the attack, but nothing happened. He gazed around at the soldiers marching alongside him. They appeared weary and uncomfortable, and the Fakaran spy knew that the time for the attack was ripe, but still no Fakaran horsemen arrived.

The sun descended in the west and eventually dipped below the peaks of the mountains. Bakhai gazed at the long shadows in confusion. He wondered what had happened to the promised attack. A few hours later, Premer Cardijja called for the column to halt. The Motangan soldiers started staking out the camp as the premer called Bakhai in for his daily briefing.

Chapter 31

Riders of the Night

"Are you familiar with this ground?" asked Premer Cardijja.

"Yes," nodded Bakhai. "I have crossed here many times."

"Will there be problems with insects here?" inquired the premer. "I cannot afford to have the men subjected to that again tonight."

"Insect attacks are very rare," shrugged Bakhai, "but no one can predict them. I have slept here many times and never been bothered. We will just have to wait and see."

"How far to the jungle?" asked General Luggar.

"One day's march," answered the Fakaran spy. "Tomorrow we turn slightly to the right when we leave camp. That is the shortest path to the jungle and will bring us close to where the evil spirit started chasing me. I hope she is not around," Bakhai added anxiously.

"You will be protected," promised the premer. "You have nothing to fear while you are in my camp."

"We will kill any evil spirits that appear," assured General Luggar with a sigh of disbelief. "Why don't you go out and draw in the dirt or whatever it is you do?"

Bakhai glanced at Premer Cardijja and saw the man nod with approval. He rose and sauntered out of the tent. As soon as he was outside the tent and away from the sentries, Bakhai sat down on the ground and secretly wove an air tunnel through the gap in the door flap. He listened to the conversation of the two men, but he learned nothing new or exciting. When a Motangan mage came near, Bakhai quickly dropped the air tunnel and rose. He wandered around the huge camp for an hour before arriving at his usual spot near the sentries at the easternmost point of the perimeter. The soldiers nodded in a friendly manner and then returned to watching for any potential intruders. Bakhai again wove an air tunnel and aimed it at a spot one league to the east. He spoke softly into it.

"What happened?" Bakhai asked, expecting to hear the voice of the Qubari shaman. "There was no attack."

Bakhai nearly gasped out loud when his brother's voice answered.

"You are to leave the Motangan camp tonight," Rejji said sternly. "As soon as full darkness comes, you are to head east as fast as you can run."

"But you did not attack today," protested Bakhai. "I can call on the insects again tonight. Tomorrow the Motangans will be weak from

lack of sleep. Besides, if I leave the premer will suspect an attack tomorrow. I must stay."

"You must leave," asserted the Astor. "The attack will occur tonight, not tomorrow, but it will not happen at all with you in the camp. In one hour's time, I am sending some Qubari to eliminate the perimeter sentries near you. Watch them closely. When they fall, you are to flee as fast as you can. Do you understand?"

"I understand," Bakhai subconsciously nodded. "I will be ready."

Rejji's end of the air tunnel dropped, and Bakhai sighed with anxiety. He stretched out on the ground and closed his eyes, willing his body to relax. The hour passed slowly as Bakhai listened to the sounds around him. He opened his eyes abruptly when he heard the premer's voice.

"What are you doing here, Bakhai?" asked Premer Cardijja.

Bakhai bolted to a sitting position and looked up at the Motangan premer.

"I often come here at the end of the day," Bakhai replied. "I like to watch the moon rise."

"That is hours away," replied the premer. "Come back to the tent and eat. You ate very little today."

"I am not hungry," Bakhai shook his head. "Besides, I do not mind waiting for the moon. It looks magical when it rises. It is so large at first, but it grows smaller as it climbs into the sky. It is wonderful to watch."

Premer Cardijja stared at the Fakaran youth and smiled. "Very well," he said, "but return to the tent after it rises. I do not wish you to be so close to the perimeter. You do not want the evil spirit to get you, do you?"

"Oh, no," Bakhai shook his head exaggeratedly. "I will hurry back to the tent right after the moonrise."

The premer nodded and started walking away. Bakhai frowned at the encounter. In a different place and a different time, he could have become friends with a man like Cardijja, but he had to remind himself that the Motangan premer was tasked to destroy Fakara and all of its inhabitants. There could be no friendship under the current circumstances. There could only be death or surrender for the Motangan.

Bakhai got to his feet and stretched as his eyes covertly scanned the darkness now surrounding the camp. The two nearest sentries suddenly dropped quietly to the ground. Bakhai quickly looked around to see who was watching. The nearest tents had blazing campfires burning before them, and Bakhai knew that their ability to see beyond the flames was limited. He bolted past the dead sentries and ran into the darkness. He never saw the Qubari warriors who had

delivered the deadly darts, but Mobi, a highly skilled Qubari warrior, soon met him.

"Come," Mobi said authoritatively. "Your brother is waiting for you."

Bakhai nodded silently and followed Mobi at a swift pace. They eventually reached Rejji, who was standing on a hill overlooking the Motangan encampment. Rejji silently embraced his brother and then returned to looking at the sprawling camp.

"It is much larger than I could have imagined," Rejji said softly as he viewed the thousands of campfires that dotted the plain. "Even our attack tonight will not be able to crush something so large."

"But tomorrow they will head for the jungle," replied Bakhai. "Surely that will stop them."

"Perhaps," frowned Mobi, "but that is not guaranteed. The Qubari have never faced anything so large. The stories of the last invaders, led by Fakar, speak of many Qubari deaths. It is said that the Qubari barely survived as a people, and we were much more numerous back then."

"The Qubari have allies this time," smiled the Astor. "Let us deal with one battle at a time. Tonight the battle rests with the horsemen of the plains. Send out the word to attack when the moon rises."

Mobi nodded and withdrew to speak with the shaman.

"What is going to happen?" asked Bakhai.

"Yojji will lead the attack from the north," explained the Astor. "Adger's men will charge from the south, and Harmagan will lead the Jiadin from the west."

"No attack from the east?" frowned Bakhai. "Premer Cardijja will wonder why I am missing then."

"There is to be no attack from the east," replied Rejji, "but there will be more than enough death to cover your escape. We want Cardijja to think that the east is his only path to safety. If he avoids the jungle and discovers the true path to Angragar, we will not be able to defend it. He simply has too many men."

The brothers watched the camp silently for over an hour. Mobi came back and stood quietly alongside them. When the moon finally appeared in the eastern sky, they watched and listened carefully. The first hint of battle was a low rumbling of the earth as thousands of hooves pounded the ground. At first no one in the Motangan camp appeared alarmed, but as the rumble grew louder shouts rang out and soldiers leaped to their feet, their movements silhouetted by the campfires.

Within moments the Motanga encampment sprang to life, soldiers grabbing their weapons and racing towards the perimeter. Few Motangans actually reached the perimeter before the Fakaran

horsemen struck. Tens of thousands of Fakaran tribesmen charged into the camp from three directions, arrows from their horse bows reaching out to fell the enemy soldiers. As the Fakarans rushed past the perimeter, their bows fell to sway on leashes attaching them to the saddles. The Fakarans drew their swords and rode into the heart of the camp. Tents and soldiers alike were trampled by the war horses as the tribesmen slashed out with their swords.

The Fakarans rode completely through the encampment with the Jiadin exiting to the east while the free tribes crisscrossed each other. Motangans who were defending against a northern invasion were soon forced to turn around and face the threat to their south as the other prong of the attack came upon them. Confusion reigned supreme in Premer Cardijja's camp. As the Fakarans fled from the battle, the screams of the wounded drifted on the air.

"Get me reports on our losses, Mobi," instructed the Astor.

The Qubari warrior nodded and retreated from the hill. When Rejji made no move to leave, Bakhai began to wonder.

"Are they going to attack again?" asked Bakhai.

"That is exactly what the Motangans are asking one another right now," smiled Rejji. "The answer rests on the reports of our losses, but another attack will not come immediately in any event. We will give the Motangans a chance to envision a peaceful night ahead of them."

"They had no sleep last night," Bakhai informed his brother. "I called upon the insects to attack them. If you wait a few hours, most of the Motangans will be asleep whether they want to be or not."

"Excellent," smiled Rejji. "Unless our losses were extreme, I think another attack tonight will be worthwhile."

* * *

"I want damage reports," shouted Premer Cardijja. "And make sure that the perimeter is well manned. They may come back for another pass."

The Motangan premer gazed around at the trampled encampment and shook his head with a sigh of defeat. Tents were burning, and men were crying out for healing mages. Everywhere the premer looked, destruction was evident. For some strange reason, only his tent had been spared, just as it had been the previous night when the insects had invaded. The thought made him think of Bakhai. He gazed at the tent and opened his mouth to speak, but General Luggar read his mind.

"There is no sign of the boy," the general offered softly, "but that does not mean anything just yet. He could be wounded, or he might have run away when the Fakarans struck."

"He was near the eastern perimeter," the premer said softly. "He must have been terrified. Send someone to look for him."

The general nodded and signaled for a soldier to come to him. He issued terse instructions and sent the soldier to search for the lad.

"It is possible that he was a spy," suggested the general.

"A spy?" balked the premer. "To what end? What could he possibly learn from his short visit? We always excluded him from important conversations."

"True," shrugged the general, "but who knows what goes through the mind of these savages?"

"You must not think of the Fakarans in such a way," cautioned the premer. "That only makes us underestimate them. The attack tonight was well planned and flawlessly executed. We must be ready for the next wave."

"You think they will attack again?" asked the general. "Their element of surprise will be gone."

"I would attack again if I were them," declared the premer. "Even without the element of surprise, we are fairly defenseless here."

"Defenseless?" balked the general. "We have two hundred and fifty thousand men under your command. They could not muster half that many men if they had the whole nation of Fakara assembled out here."

"And who is to say that they do not have all of their fighters here?" asked the premer. "Look around you. Show me a tent that wasn't trampled when they passed through. I cannot imagine how many thousands of riders passed through this camp, but it was a lot."

General Luggar did not bother to point out the premer's own tent. He understood the point that Cardijja was making, and it was a valid point. There had certainly been tens of thousands of riders in each of the three prongs to the Fakaran attack. The thought of another attack sent shivers up the general's spine.

"How do you think they found us?" asked Luggar. "The lad said that the tribes were far to the south."

"I suspect that their scouts have been following our progress for some time," answered the premer. "We cannot exactly hide our presence very well, not with the size of this army. They probably have scouts up on the mountain peaks."

"Then we must gain the safety of the jungle quickly," suggested the general. "Perhaps it is wise to strike the camp right now and start marching, especially if you expect another attack. Let's be gone from here before they return."

"I would agree wholeheartedly," frowned the premer, "except that the men had no sleep last night. Curse those insects. That couldn't have happened at a worse time. No, Luggar, the men can't march tonight. Increase the perimeter by tenfold, especially in the areas where the Fakarans entered and exited the camp. Let the others rest,

but with their weapons at their sides. As soon as dawn arrives, I want this whole camp up and ready to move out at a brisk pace."

The premer did not wait for a reply. He turned and entered his tent. General Luggar walked to a group of runners stationed nearby. He issued orders that would implement the premer's commands. He left it up to the individual generals to determine which troops would be forced to stand sentry and which would be allowed to sleep.

For the next two hours, General Luggar walked around the encampment making sure that the premer's orders had been carried out. Eventually he was pleased with the preparations and confident in his belief that the Fakarans would not return before morning. He returned to his resurrected tent and went to sleep.

When the attacks came an hour later, they were not from the same directions as the previous attacks. The Jiadin came from the southeast, Yojji's men charged from southwest, and Adger's troops attacked from the northeast. Despite all the preparations, the Motangans were unprepared for the changes in direction. Once again the Motangan encampment was invaded and destroyed as the three cavalries crisscrossed the camp.

While the second attack was more costly to the Fakarans in terms of casualties, it broke the morale of the Motangan troops. The tired and injured Motangans remained awake for the rest of the night, waiting for the next wave of Fakaran horsemen.

* * *

Emperor Vand entered the throne room of the temple at Vandegar. His eyes narrowed as he watched Premer Tzargo and the mage, Pakar, talking softly near the door. They were so absorbed in their conversation that neither of them had noticed the emperor enter the room. Vand walked to his throne and sat down. Clearing his throat loudly, he glared at the two men. Premer Tzargo bowed low towards the emperor while Pakar hurried across the floor to take his place with the other eleven mages assigned to guard the emperor.

"You have something to report?" Vand scowled at Tzargo.

The premer nodded and marched across the room to stand in front of the emperor. He bowed again and waited for permission to speak.

"Report," scowled Vand.

"I was just informed of a battle in Khadora," Tzargo swallowed hard. "The report came from the force under Premer Shamal's command."

"Yes, yes," the emperor snapped impatiently. "Tell me what is significant about this report. Has Shamal conquered the country?"

"I do not know," frowned Premer Tzargo. "The report was sent as the battle was beginning. It occurred somewhere between Sintula and

Chantise."

"Then Sintula has fallen?" asked the emperor.

"It would appear so," Tzargo said hesitantly.

"It would appear so?" mocked the emperor. "Is it too much to ask to have decent reports on my armies? Pakar!"

The black-cloak hurried across the floor and stood beside the premer. He bowed low in a sign of ultimate respect and then rose to look into the emperor's eyes.

"The mages under Premer Shamal have been negligent in their reporting," Pakar offered, knowing that his words would cause some deaths among his confederates. Vand did not stand for incompetence and his punishment was a humiliating death. "We should have had a report when Sintula fell, but none arrived. The fact that Shamal's army was already north of Sintula declares that the Khadoran city must have fallen."

"I do not want your suppositions," scowled Vand. "I want the reports from the people in the field. When I want an analysis, I will ask for one. Now, leave me and get a thorough report on Shamal's victories."

"We have been trying for some time to contact him," replied Pakar. "We have been unable to contact a single mage under Premer Shamal."

"What are you saying?" frowned the emperor. "Are you trying to make me believe that the Khadorans defeated Shamal? That is preposterous. Go and get me my reports."

"If the emperor will allow my thoughts?" Pakar asked hesitantly.

Vand sighed with frustration and shook his head, but he waved his hand in a show of permission for the mage to speak.

"We have had a communication from Meliban," declared the black-cloak. "I think it is of great interest and may reveal another reason why Shamal might not be able to communicate."

"Proceed," ordered the emperor, his curiosity aroused.

"Two mages arrived in Meliban from Vandamar," stated Pakar. "They spoke with great authority and warned against any use of the air tunnel spell. They informed our people in Meliban that the air tunnel was corrupt. They said that the elves had found a way to weave a compulsion spell through the air tunnel and that using it over any distance would be dangerous. They even demanded that our calls to Meliban not be answered. It was only after I threatened to go there and kill them that they finally picked up the air tunnel."

"And what is the importance of this?" Vand asked. He thought he understood where Pakar was going, but he wanted nothing left unsaid.

"If the same rumor was spread in Khadora," reasoned Pakar, "Shamal's mages would be afraid to contact us for fear of jeopardizing

your safety. I do not know if this is the case, but it is a possibility that we must consider."

"Then you were wise to bring it to my attention, Pakar," nodded the emperor.

"Perhaps we should send some of Premer Tzargo's men over the Fortung Mountains to investigate," suggested Pakar.

"Are you so easily convinced that the elves can corrupt the air tunnel spell?" inquired the emperor.

"No," Pakar shook his head, "I am not convinced at all. In fact, I see no possibility of that happening. There would have to be an elf at one of the ends of the air tunnel. If it were broken anywhere else, both mages would feel the disruption. I believe this to be a story made up to limit our communications. The enemy wants to blind us to what they are doing."

"Well reasoned," smiled the emperor. "Who were these traitors who spread the false tales of the corrupted air tunnels?"

Pakar bit his lip and hesitated just a moment too long. The emperor's demeanor instantly changed to darkness as he detected the mage's hesitation. As Vand's mouth opened to scold the mage, Pakar spit out the answer.

"It was Xavo and Lady Mystic," Pakar said hurriedly. "They claimed to be coming here with word about the corruption. That is why the mages in Meliban felt at ease with not answering our calls."

"Xavo?" echoed the emperor with disbelief. "Did he not accompany us here? Who gave him leave to return to Vandamar?"

"He did not come with us," frowned Pakar. "I assumed that his orders were to stay there."

Vand seethed at Xavo's betrayal. The mage had been afforded the highest position for his loyalty, and his duplicity stung the emperor. Vand's mind shifted to his daughter, and suddenly he nodded to himself. His rebel daughter had managed to seduce another mage to help her in her attempt to seek revenge. Vand vowed that she would not live to see her goal.

"Contact Meliban," commanded the emperor. "I want both Xavo and Lady Mystic brought to me here in Vandegar. I do not care what condition they arrive in, as long as they still breath. Their deaths will be an event to be watched by all."

"They are no longer in Meliban," Pakar said softly. "They left days ago. They should have been here by now."

Vand's gaze narrowed as he tried to imagine what the duo would be doing in Fakara. For several long moments, a silence hung over the chamber. Eventually Vand locked eyes with Pakar. He spoke calmly and softly, but no one could mistake the tinge of hatred in his voice.

"Send word to everyone under my command," instructed the

emperor. “Xavo and Lady Mystic are traitors. They are to be apprehended in any conceivable way, as long as they arrive in Vandegar alive. The reward for their capture will be unlimited bounty and status.”

“It shall be as you command,” bowed the black-cloak. “Should we send men to Khadora as well?”

“No,” the emperor responded tersely. “I will deal with Shamal in my own way. Go and spread the word.”

With a dismissive wave, the emperor sent his mages from the throne room. Premer Tzargo bowed and backed out of the room, leaving Emperor Vand alone. Vand sat silently for a few moments and then rose from his throne. He appeared to be walking casually out of the throne room, but his mind was filled with rage. He cursed Xavo and his daughter for their interference. He mentally berated Shamal for failure to keep him informed. He spat on the memory of Doralin who had failed him in the Sakova.

When the emperor reached the roof of the temple, he was in a particularly foul mood, which was quite appropriate for the company he was about to commune with. Located on the roof were six hideous demons, visages of harshly chiseled black stones. Their metallic sounding claws tapped the roof of the temple as they felt the emperor approaching. They turned as one to gaze at the doorway leading into the temple from the roof. Vand walked through the doorway, his face a mask of hatred. The demons’ angular lips parted in what some would mistake for a smile.

Vand ignored the demons at first, which he knew incensed them. He walked to the edge of the roof and gazed out over the plain stretching westward. The Fortung Mountains were visible far in the distance, and beyond them was Khadora. The six demons moved slowly as if with no direction, but they converged on the emperor. They surrounded him in a semicircle and waited to hear his words.

“Premer Shamal has proven to be a disappointment,” the emperor said so softly that it sounded like he was whispering to someone, but there was no one there except the demons. “He needs to be told the errors of his ways. Do not harm him, but bring him to me.”

The emperor turned and touched one of the demons. He looked the creature in the eyes and said, “Kill anyone who gets in your way, but bring me Shamal. Do it now.”

The chosen demon grinned at the others as they backed away. The creature stepped to the very edge of the roof and leaned forward, allowing his body to fall. Vand watched with curiosity as the demon plummeted towards the ground. Suddenly, long black wings unfolded and swung out from the demon’s body, and the fall turned into a glide. With a single flap of those powerful wings, the demon rose

upward and soared towards the west. Vand stood silently and watched the black specter sail through the sky until the demon was merely a speck lost in the haze of the distant mountains.

Chapter 32

Terror in the Jungle

Emperor Marak rode a horse south along the roadway of death. His expression was a mixture of victory tinged with a deep sadness as he viewed the carnage left from the battle. He passed several work crews and their wagons and paused momentarily to watch the men loading the wagons with bodies and body parts. He shook his head with disgust at the wasted human lives and continued southward. A few minutes later he came to the area of the road where he had attacked Premer Shamal and his officers. Again he paused as his eyes scanned the grounds. Blood soaked the road and little was recognizable, but he saw the head of the Motangan premer staring blankly up at the sky. The man's mouth was open wide with what must have been his dying shout. Marak closed his eyes and offered up a prayer to Kaltara. He gave thanks for the victory over the Motangans, but he also prayed for an end to the continuing slaughter brought upon the world by Emperor Vand.

"I told you he would be alive," Fisher shouted joyfully.

Marak's eyes flew open, and he saw the Khadoran spy flanked by Gunta and Halman. The three faces grinned back at him as the Khadorans raced forward to stand before the Torak.

"You did it," smiled Gunta. "You defeated the Motangans."

"Not that we ever had any doubts," Halman added quickly.

"We have had a great victory," Marak replied softly, "but the war is not over. Fighting still awaits us in Fakara."

"The Khadorans are going into Fakara?" asked Gunta.

"I cannot ask the Khadorans to go to war in Fakara," declared the Torak. "They have already suffered much, and they have a country to rebuild, but we are going."

"You have but to ask them," frowned Fisher. "They will deny you nothing."

"Their loyalty warms my heart," Marak smiled tautly, "but it is their faith in Kaltara that I seek, not their desire to make me a deity. I will leave their actions up to their own hearts."

"As you should," King Avalar smiled as he walked towards the group with his daughter by his side. "You may urge a people to war, but it is worthless unless victory is in their own hearts."

"Which is why the elves will be going to Fakara with you," grinned Princess Alastasia.

“That pleases me greatly,” smiled the Torak. “The elves are always welcome wherever I may be. From the air I witnessed the results to those who would stand before the elves in battle. You make a formidable foe.”

“From what I have seen of this roadway of death on my way here,” replied King Avalar, “the Motangans had many formidable foes in this battle. The Chula are already forming ranks to head to Fakara, as are my people. You have no need to even ask them. We who travel by foot need the head start. The Chula and the elves will meet you on the other side of the Fortung Mountains.”

“You have spoken to the Chula?” Marak asked with surprise.

“Tmundo and Ukaro were searching for survivors as we passed by,” nodded the king of the elves. “I introduced myself. We agreed to travel to Fakara together.”

“Then you both will travel in good company,” grinned the Torak. “I will return to the berm and inform the Lords’ Council of my destination. Perhaps some of them will choose to join me.”

Emperor Marak nodded to the elves and turned his horse around. King Avalar and Princess Alastasia watched as the Torak rode northward, his three shadows on foot hurrying to keep up.

“He impresses me each time we meet,” King Avalar said softly as he turned to head back to his people.

“He has that effect on everyone,” smiled the princess. “I will not be surprised to find out that the entire Khadoran nation has followed him over the Fortung Mountains.”

“I agree,” smiled Avalar, “but they still have much work to do here burying the dead. Let us get our people moving to the next battlefield.”

The elves walked southward to join their people. They were unaware that their words had been overheard. Moments later a tall, stony creature slid out of the forest. Deep black eyes scanned the road in each direction before the demon bent over and picked up the head of Premer Shamal. The demon hissed and spat on the road, smoke rising from the acidic saliva as it ate into the surface of the road. The creature slid back into the trees and disappeared.

* * *

Smoke billowed upward over the foothills of the Fakaran mountains, creating a stain in the flawless blue sky. Xavo looked up at the smoke and frowned.

“Our position is too clearly marked,” he declared. “It is time to move on before the tribes come to investigate.”

“And where will we find the next caravan?” asked Lady Mystic as she gazed at the charred remains of twelve wagons.

Xavo blinked and stared at the corpses littering the road around

the wagons. “There will be no more caravans,” he finally replied. “I took count of the wagons when we were in Meliban. The Motangans have no more to send.”

“They could build more wagons,” offered Lady Mystic.

“They could,” agreed Xavo, “but we are not going to sit idle and wait for them to do so. Besides, I do not think they would build more wagons without discovering what happened to the old ones first.”

“Then we are to ambush their soldiers coming to investigate the reason for the wagons not returning?” questioned Vand’s daughter.

“No,” Xavo sighed heavily. “There is no point in putting ourselves between the tribes and the Motangans. The time has come for us to go to Vandegar.”

“Surely my father will have learned of our treason by now,” balked Lady Mystic. “Going to Vandegar is not the brightest suggestion you have ever made. We will never get close to Vand.”

“Perhaps not,” shrugged Xavo, “but it is our destiny, or at least mine.”

“Your destiny is mine,” Lady Mystic smiled thinly. “If Vandegar is where you must go, I will go with you, but I want you to be aware of what awaits us there.”

“The same thing that has awaited us wherever we went,” replied Xavo. “We have cheated death quite a few times already. Why let potential consequences disturb us now?”

“Just because one successfully cheats death,” frowned Lady Mystic, “is not an excuse to keep tempting it. We could just forget this war and escape to someplace where we can live in peace.”

“Can we really?” Xavo shook his head. “Can I really abandon my daughter at the time of her greatest need? Can you walk away from the destruction that your father is foisting upon the world? How can we have an expectation of living in peace while the whole world is dying around us? No, my dear, we cannot flee from this savagery, not while we have any ability to stop it. Do not fool yourself for a single minute. There can be no peace in our hearts until Vand is vanquished.”

“At least you are not going to Vandegar merely to commit suicide,” Lady Mystic smiled weakly. “I will go with you and help you defeat my father, but promise me that you will not throw your life away. Promise me that you will try to give me the life of peace that I desire.”

“Nothing would please me more,” Xavo smiled as he embraced his lover, “but there are no guarantees in life. Vand most certainly will be expecting us. It will be tricky to stay alive long enough to kill him.”

“If we are even capable of killing him,” Lady Mystic warned softly. “There is no mage more powerful than Vand, and he will not be

alone in his defense. He will surround himself with the most powerful mages available."

"No one is indestructible," replied Xavo as he broke the embrace. "We will head north from here to avoid anyone coming to investigate the smoke. We will also need to take a long, circuitous route to Vandegar to even get close to it without being detected. Come. Time is wasting."

* * *

The weary Motangan army marched southeast, following Bakhai's directions. The soldiers were tired and jittery. They had not had a decent night's sleep in three days. Many of them still scratched welts from the insect attack two nights earlier. Others had been wounded in the fighting the night before when the Fakaran tribes attacked without warning. All of the soldiers were hungry, as no food had been delivered in over a week. The meager rations that were left from previous caravans were guarded jealously by the soldiers assigned to dole them out. There was not a smile on a single one of the two hundred thousand faces.

"The jungle," General Luggar pointed as he rode alongside Premer Cardijja.

"Just where Bakhai said it would be," nodded the premer. "Do you still take him for a spy?"

"I don't know," sighed the general. "We have had nothing but bad luck since he joined us. Then he miraculously disappeared during the raid on our camp. What else am I to suspect?"

"I imagine that he got scared and ran," shrugged the premer. "I had promised him protection, but he must have known that I could not provide it. In his place, I might have run, too. As for bad luck pursuing us, the attack of the tribes had nothing to do with luck. It was a well coordinated and planned attack. They knew exactly where we were and chose their moment of attack at our weakest moment."

"And the insects?" asked the general.

"Bad luck," shrugged the premer, "but you can hardly lay that at Bakhai's feet."

"You miss him, don't you?" asked the general, his eyebrow rising in sudden understanding.

"I do," conceded the premer. "He was not a very bright lad, but he was likeable. Plus his knowledge of this strange land was invaluable. I hope he survived the attack of the tribes."

"You had best not let too many know of your feelings for the lad," warned the general. "All of the Fakarans are to be exterminated. That will include Bakhai in the end. If you attempt to alter the emperor's orders to save the lad, your fate will be worse than his."

"I know the emperor's orders well," scowled the premer. "I do not

need you to remind me of them."

"But you don't agree with them?" questioned the general.

"We have known each other for many years, Luggar," the premer said as he stared at his friend. "You know me well enough to understand that I favor other methods of defeating an enemy other than killing him. I have voiced my opinions to Tzargo before, so he knows where I stand. I have never understood why we could not just conquer and rule this new land. Why must we destroy it?"

"And how did Tzargo answer?" inquired the general.

"Harshly," frowned Cardijja. "He threatened to remove me from command if I could not carry out his orders."

"So we kill everything in our path," Luggar nodded.

"Indeed," agreed the premer, "but that does not mean that I have to like it. Even Bakhai will fall before our swords soon enough. I hope that he understands when the time comes."

"Would you understand if you were in his place?" asked General Luggar.

The premer rode on in silence for a long time as he earnestly considered the question. Finally, he shook his head and sighed.

"I would like to think that I would try to understand," admitted the premer, "but the truth is that I doubt that I would be able to. What harm would it be to overlook one death in all the thousands that we must kill?"

"Careful, Cardijja," cautioned the general. "Such thinking will get you killed. Do not even consider such thoughts."

Premer Cardijja opened his mouth to speak, but he quickly thought better of it. Instead he rode on in silence, staring at the approaching jungle. After a few minutes, he pushed Bakhai from his mind and addressed the general forcefully.

"I want all of the men into the jungle before dark," ordered Premer Cardijja. "Make sure that the vanguard penetrates deep enough into the jungle to accommodate everyone behind them. Once we are all off of this infernal plain, I want to make camp for the night. Send out scouts to find food, and post a serious watch along the edge of the jungle. Quadruple the normal guard. If a single tribesman is seen on the plain, I want the entire camp to know about it."

"I will see to it," promised the general.

Premer Cardijja watched General Luggar ride towards the vanguard to deliver his orders. His mind started to drift to thoughts of Bakhai, and the premer forcefully fought to focus on the jungle instead, but it was a losing battle. What Cardijja had not shared with his friend was that Bakhai reminded the premer of his own son. His son would have been around Bakhai's age had he not been attacked and killed by a krul gone mad years ago. Tears formed in the corners

of the premer's eyes, and he hastily wiped them away before anyone could notice. The premer knew that he had to snap out of his current thinking. He suddenly wheeled his horse and rode off to perform an inspection of his troops.

Three hours later, the last of the Motangan troops entered the jungle. Two hundred thousand men occupied a wide swath of the jungle and the perimeter guards numbered over ten thousand just to watch the edge of the jungle. General Luggar decided to forego guards on the other three sides of the encampment, as he wanted as many men to rest as possible. Hundreds of scouts were sent deeper into the jungle to forage for food, and many of them returned with roots, berries, and fruit. Encouraged by the findings, Luggar organized groups of soldiers to penetrate even farther into the dense jungle.

The bulk of the soldiers trampled the vegetation at the edge of the jungle as they tried to find places to bed down for the night. Occasionally curses rang out as men were pricked by sharp-leaved plants, or stumbled into a nest of swarming bugs, but as the sky darkened with the coming night, the camp started to settle down peacefully. Little did the Motangans realize that the serenity of the jungle that they had sought as protection from the tribesmen was little more than an illusion of tranquility.

* * *

Far from the edge of the jungle, the foragers delighted in the variety of fruit and berries. They stuffed their mouths as they filled sacks to carry back to the camp for others to enjoy. So intent were they at harvesting the edibles that they failed to hear the soft clicks of the approaching tyriks. One of the tyriks seized a Motangan soldier in its mandibles. His scream of horror and pain tore through the air. The other soldiers in the group spun to see what the problem was. Mouths and eyes widened in terror as they stared at the huge spider. Sacks fell to the ground abandoned, and fruit fell from their hands.

Several of the soldiers drew their swords and moved cautiously forward to help their comrades, but most of the soldiers turned and ran for their lives. They ran without regard of paths, their screams trailing behind them. Some of them rushed into murky bogs that sucked them downward with every movement and struggle. Others ran blindly into huge webs, unable to free themselves or do anything other than shout for help and curse.

Within moments of the appearance of the first tyrik, screams ripped through the jungle from one side of the encampment to the other. The soldiers in the camp who had been bedding down for an early night of rest rose quickly. They stared into the darkness of the jungle and wondered what was happening to their comrades.

Premer Cardijja exited his tent, which sat in a section of the

jungle that had been cleared for it. He gazed at the soldiers and listened to the distant screams. Recognizing that his entire army was frozen with fear, he moved quickly to tackle the situation. He strode purposefully towards the nearest tents and commanded the attention of the officers there.

"Get together a group of a thousand men," ordered the premer. "Take them deeper into the jungle to discover what is happening to the foragers. Report back to me immediately when you find out what is going on."

Premer Cardijja did not wait for a response from the officer. He turned and walked back towards his tent. Only then did he turn around to make sure that his orders were being carried out. As he watched the officer rally the group of unwilling explorers, General Luggar arrived at the tent.

"Do you know what is going?" asked Luggar.

"I just ordered a thousand men to find out," replied Cardijja. "The men cannot take another night of sleeplessness."

"I have ordered sentries for the jungle perimeter," stated General Luggar. "I had thought that we would not need them tonight."

"It can't be another Fakaran attack," the premer sighed in frustration. "The tribesmen would never give up the element of surprise by attacking a few hundred foragers."

"Could it be kruls?" asked the general. "They do inhabit the jungles on Motanga."

"Kruls are not natural beings," Cardijja shook his head in disgust. "They are animals given human qualities by Vand's mages. They are despicable creatures, but they do not exist outside of Motanga."

"I noticed that none were attached to our army," commented Luggar. "Is there a reason for that?"

"A very good one," replied the premer. "Neither Shamal nor I would have them in our armies. We convinced Tzargo that the Sakova was the appropriate place for their use. Doralin got stuck with them all, and as we now know, they did little to help his cause."

The screams finally stopped, and the jungle grew disturbingly silent. For a long time the camp remained staring into the jungle, but eventually some of the soldiers began to return to their sleeping mats. Slowly, the encampment began to return to normal, and Cardijja sighed with relief. The silence barely lasted half an hour. Screams once again filled the air, and the soldiers were quick to get to their feet and draw their swords. Cardijja cursed under his breath.

"This cannot continue," scowled the premer. "I will not allow my men to be terrorized."

"There is little that you can do," soothed General Luggar. "You can order the men to retire, but you cannot make them fall asleep.

Perhaps we should move out of the jungle?"

"Onto the open plains?" balked the premer. "How can you suggest such a thing after last night?"

"At least the Fakarans are an enemy that we can fight," shrugged the general. "What is in this jungle cannot even be identified."

"We will identify it," retorted the premer. "As soon as those thousand men return, we will know what we are up against. All I want is one good night's sleep for my men, and we will march through this jungle killing everything in it."

General Luggar did not reply that he thought that sleep was not going to be had by anyone. Instead he remained quiet and waited for the screaming to stop. The screams did start to diminish, and eventually they stopped completely. Premer Cardijja waited for another half an hour for the patrol to return, but no one appeared.

"They are not returning," General Luggar finally said softly.

"Inconceivable," snapped the premer. "Who can kill a thousand armed men without showing themselves?"

"I do not mean to disagree with you," sighed the general, "but there has been ample time for one of those thousand men to report back here."

"Then I shall send out two thousand," snarled the premer. "I will know what my army is up against."

"Make it five thousand," suggested General Luggar.

"Five thousand men for a patrol?" balked the premer.

"Whatever attacked the last patrol did so without even one of the men returning to us," justified the general. "With each patrol we send out, we subject the men to another hour of sleeplessness. Send out five thousand, and get the job done."

"Then we can all sleep," Cardijja nodded in reluctant agreement. "See to it."

General Luggar left the premer and delivered Cardijja's orders to another general. The chosen general was not happy with the task, but Luggar knew that he would obey. Luggar returned to the premer and reported his actions.

"You never did like him, did you?" asked the premer, referring to the chosen general.

"Not ever," smiled General Luggar. "He has always been a pompous bore. While I hope that his men survive the patrol, his loss would be welcome."

"Do not get your hopes up," chuckled the premer. "He will undoubtedly keep well behind his men. In fact, he will be the first one to return."

An hour passed by as the general and the premer waited for word

from the patrol. Many of the men in the camp cheered when the large column left to investigate, and most of them were now asleep. When the screams finally came it was an irritating sound to the premer. He was quickly losing the feeling of terror, and instead was becoming angry at the mystery of the attacks. Rallying shouts mixed in with the screams, and Cardijja nodded in satisfaction.

"Finally," stated the premer. "Our men are fighting back whoever is trying to scare us."

No sooner had the premer spoken then the rallying shouts ended. Only the screams remained, and they eventually tapered off to silence again. Cardijja cursed loudly and went storming towards the perimeter bordering the jungle. General Luggar ran after him.

"Where are you going?" shouted the general. "What are you doing?"

"I intend to find out what is happening if I have to lead a patrol myself," snapped Cardijja.

"You can't!" shouted the general.

Premer Cardijja ignored his friend and headed for the perimeter. When he reached the perimeter, one of the sentries shouted and pointed. Cardijja immediately stopped and stared into the jungle as General Luggar came up alongside him. They both stared in amazement as Motangan soldiers came stumbling out of the jungle and into the encampment. The premer shouted for them to report, but they either did not hear him, or they chose to ignore him. Each of the men stumbled along clumsily, their eyes wide open and staring blankly.

"They are in shock," frowned General Luggar. "I have never seen anything like it before."

One of the soldiers tripped and fell. Instead of getting up and following the others, he just stayed on the ground and began babbling. The sentries around the man stared uncomprehendingly, but Premer Cardijja walked over and grabbed the man by his arms. He pulled the soldier to his feet and then slapped his face hard. The soldier blinked in confusion. Cardijja felt the man's limbs trembling. He slapped the man again.

"Tell me what you saw out there?" demanded the premer. "Tell me."

The soldier stared at the premer for a moment before a glimmer of recognition showed in his eyes.

"Spiders," the soldiers said haltingly.

"More insects," scowled the premer. "Do Motangan soldiers now run from insects?"

"Not insects," quivered the soldier as he almost fell over. "Spiders. Bigger than a house."

Premer Cardijja stared in disbelief, but General Luggar rushed over to help support the crazed soldier.

“What did the spiders do?” asked the general.

“They eat people,” swallowed the soldier as he began to sound more lucid. “We found hundreds of men wrapped up in their webs. It was when we tried to free them that the spiders struck. They trapped us.”

“How did they trap you?” asked Premer Cardijja.

“They built webs between us and the camp,” answered the soldier.

“How did you manage to return?” asked General Luggar. “Did you cut through the web.”

“No,” the soldier shook his head. “You cannot cut through the web. Someone found a way out and the rest of us tried to follow. We had to crawl under a fallen tree, but the spiders noticed us escaping. They came after us. They want to eat us.”

“Have this man taken to my tent,” Premer Cardijja ordered General Luggar. “We need to hear more of this tale. Get a healer to join us there.”

Chapter 33

News from the Front

Premer Cardijja stopped pacing around the inside of his tent and turned to face the soldier that had been interrogated. The soldier looked haggard, his eyes deep in their sockets and his hair matted down with perspiration, but not as bad as he had before the healers got to him. The soldier looked up expectantly at the premer.

"You may go now," the premer said softly. "Do not discuss your trip into the jungle with anyone."

The soldier rose from the ground and bowed to the premer as he backed towards the tent flap. In a moment he was gone, and Cardijja shook his head as he pondered the information that had been gleaned from the soldier. Several minutes later the flap ruffled as General Luggar hurried inside.

"We have a problem," the general informed Cardijja. "Only several hundred men managed to return from the jungle, but they are quickly spreading the word about the giant spiders. If we don't act immediately, the men will start to desert."

"I was suspecting as much," frowned the premer, "although I had hoped that we could contain it."

"What will you do?" asked the general.

"I will do what I must to preserve my men," answered the premer. "You are to instruct the sentries to kill any man trying to leave the jungle. I also want the leader of the mages, Cymelange, sent to my tent immediately."

"Do you think the mages can help?" questioned Luggar.

"They must be able to do something," nodded Cardijja. "We have no other choice. The men need a night's sleep, and they will not get it on the plains. These spider creatures must be vulnerable to something. Let the mages figure out what it is."

General Luggar nodded and retreated from the tent. A few minutes later a black-cloaked mage entered, his eyes darting suspiciously around the interior of the tent. Cardijja did not care much for the mages, but he found the mage leader particularly distasteful. The black-cloak had never even had the decency to hide his contempt for the soldiers.

"You sent for me?" asked Cymelange.

"I did," Cardijja nodded informally. "You are to gather your mages and kill the huge spiders. I want the task completed

immediately."

"It is much wiser to attack them in the morning," balked the mage. "We have never encountered such beasts before, and we may need time to develop the proper strategy to defeat them."

"This cannot wait for the morning," snapped Premer Cardijja. "My men must get some sleep."

"Mages are not like your soldiers," retorted the black-cloak. "We do not just charge into the jungle and kill things. We will study the creatures first. Perhaps we will try a spell or two to see what affects them the most, but that will be impossible if we cannot see them."

"Then illuminate the jungle," countered the premer. "Do not tell me that your mages are not capable of such things. I have seen it done before."

"And everyone around for leagues will know where we are," argued Cymelange. "Such a display will surely call the horsemen down upon us."

"I am not concerned about the horsemen while we are inside the jungle," snapped Cardijja. "Let them come and attack us. In fact, I would welcome that right now. It would take the minds of my men off of the jungle. In case you hadn't noticed, the men are on the verge of hysteria. They have not had sleep in days, and word of the spiders has soared through the camp like a contagious disease. By morning there will be no camp if the spiders are not destroyed now."

"It is your task to control your men," scowled the mage. "Why should I endanger my mages to make your task easier?"

"There are a number of reasons," the premer said threateningly, "but the most important one is that your mages are surrounded by two hundred thousand of my men, and they don't care much for mages. I will not dictate how you use your magic to kill the spiders, but I do demand that you accomplish it tonight."

"You are threatening me?" balked Cymelange. "Do you know what my men could do to yours?"

"I am quite well versed in your skills and tactics," Cardijja replied steadily. "I also know that without my men to protect your mages, none of you will survive this trip into Fakara. Your mages will be immediately evicted from this encampment as soon as this meeting is over. You may lead them into battle against the spiders, or you can set up your own camp in the jungle. Either way I will have your mages between my men and the spiders. If you decide to attack us, you will have enemies on both sides of you. The choice is yours."

"You wouldn't dare?" gasped the mage.

"I can, and I will," asserted the premer as he marched to the tent flap.

He held the flap back as he shouted orders to the men outside.

The orders were to escort the mages to the eastern perimeter of the camp after calling the camp to alert. Cardijja turned and glared at the mage when he was done.

"My decision has been made," Cardijja said softly. "Now go and make yours."

Cymelange spat on the ground as he stormed out of the tent. He snarled at the soldiers grabbing their weapons as he stomped towards the mage area of the encampment. By the time he reached the mage area, most of the black-cloaks were gathered in a large knot. Their voices were raised as they argued about how to react to the growing knot of soldiers gathering nearby. There was an air of concern and confusion, and all of the mages looked towards the leader as he approached. He slowed his pace as he tried to think about his approach to the situation. As much as he detested Cardijja and wanted to repay the premer for his actions, he was more concerned about the survival of his mages. He decided to act positively towards the assignment.

"We are all going to exit the camp and take the fight to the huge spiders that you have heard about," the leader announced loudly. "I want groups formed by specialty. The first group will be illumination. I want the jungle lit up as if it were high sun. Fire mages will be in the vanguard. When we find one of these spiders, I want it incinerated. Also, test the webs for flammability. They may try to trap us."

"What about ground trembles?" asked one of the black-cloaks.

"I doubt that quakes will do much to the spiders," frowned Cymelange. "Their webs will weather the spell. Perhaps ice or lightning might work, but we will try fire first. It may well cause fear in the other spiders and drive them away."

The mages took the news well, and Cymelange sighed with relief as a thousand black-cloaks prepared for battle. He mentally vowed revenge on Premer Cardijja, but that was a matter that could wait until after the spiders were destroyed. Within an hour, ten separate columns of black-cloaks filed into the jungle like the spokes of a half-wheel.

Cymelange chose one of the center columns and joined the hundred mages as they started into the dark of the jungle. Bright projectiles shot skyward from the vanguard of the columns, and the jungle brightened somewhat. At first the magical spells only produced an eerie glow, and the long shadows gave the foliage an ominous look, but as more projectiles were sent skyward the glow increased to a daylight appearance.

Cymelange's eyes scanned the dense foliage as he followed the column away from the Motangan encampment. The plant growth in the jungle grew with abandonment with only small paths meandering

through the foliage. The narrow paths could hardly be called trails, but the leaders of the columns did their best to keep the groups separated. Cymelange nodded with approval even as it became difficult to keep the other columns in view as the mages spread out in a ever-widening arc. Small creatures made noises as they leaped or slithered through the undergrowth to hurry away from the invaders. Cymelange paid no attention to them. His eyes searched for the monstrous spiders that the soldiers had described.

Before long, Cymelange was unable to see any of the mages other than the column he was hunting with. He began to wonder how far into the jungle they would have to go to find the first spider. More bright projectile shot into the air and the mage gazed upward. He could tell from the wide arc of projectiles how far apart the columns had progressed. He smiled in appreciation of the discipline of his men. The projectiles were evenly spaced, which indicated that the column leaders were proceeding as they had been taught.

An hour passed by slowly as the columns drove deeper into the foreign jungle. The mages were starting to get bored with the expedition, and Cymelange wondered if he could merely return to the camp and declare that the spiders had been defeated. Premer Cardijja would have no basis to disbelieve him. Come morning, the mages could once again go searching without having to waste magical energy on the brightening spells. He was seriously contemplating issuing such orders when a scream was heard far to the right.

The column halted as all of the mages turned and gazed in the direction of the short scream. The other columns were no longer visible, and looking towards the right yielded no information as to the cause of the scream. Cymelange immediately wove an air tunnel and moved it towards the right of the column. He spoke his name softly into the air tunnel as he slowly moved the far end of it farther away from himself. Within moments another Motangan mage picked up the other end of the air tunnel and reported no problems other than hearing the lone scream farther off.

Cymelange continued moving the air tunnel from column to column, each of the mages reporting no problems. He frowned when no one from the last column picked up his air tunnel. He continued moving the air tunnel around in search of the missing column, but no one would answer him. That is when the scream was heard from the left. Cymelange spun around and extended his air tunnel far to the left. He did not waste time asking each column if things were alright. Instead he tried to make contact with the outermost column. He could not.

“We are being attacked on our flanks,” Cymelange announced loudly. “I want all spokes of the wheel to start converging so that we

meet together within the hour. Each of you make contact with one of the other columns with an air tunnel. I want you to maintain contact until we all gather together. Report anything that sounds suspicious."

"Are we turning around and heading back towards the camp?" asked one of the nearby mages.

"No," answered Cymelange. "I want to converge deeper into the jungle. To return now is to have lost men without a victory. I will not yield to creatures that think that they can scare us. We will go deep enough to put the creatures between us and the camp and then we will attack, driving them towards Premer Cardijja's men."

The column remained stationary for several more minutes as mages called out to the column that they would communicate with. When all of the air tunnels were in place, the column continued onward. They had progressed for fifteen minutes before one of the mages spoke.

"I just lost contact with the column that I was monitoring," announced the mage. "There was no warning or cry of attack. The other end of the air tunnel just dropped."

"Reestablish contact," advised Cymelange. "Perhaps he tripped over a root or something."

"I am trying," frowned the mage. "No one is answering."

"I just lost contact also," reported another mage. "Something strange is going on."

"Do not start panicking like soldiers," scowled Cymelange. "Air tunnels can be disrupted by many common occurrences. Remember your lessons."

The two mages that had lost communications with the other columns stopped walking as the column continued onward. Cymelange looked back at them and shook his head in disgust. While he realized that the other columns might be in danger, he could not believe that any column could be lost without some type of alarm or notice. Even the first two attacks had resulted in screams that could be heard far off. Fifteen minutes later, two more mages announced that they had lost contact with the columns they had been communicating with.

"Halt the column," commanded Cymelange as he stood staring at the two mages, waiting for them to report that they had reestablished contact.

Minutes dragged on as he watched the two mages desperately try to get someone to answer them. Neither of them had success. Cymelange turned and peered along the path behind him. Neither of the two mages who had previously stopped was in sight. A shiver raced up his spine as he realized that his mages were being deliberately and methodically destroyed, and they were being

destroyed by a cunning enemy.

"Announce to the other columns that we are turning around," ordered Cymelange. "They are to immediately begin converging on our path back to the camp. Inform them that they are in danger of attacks from the flanks."

The chosen mages immediately relayed Cymelange's orders to the other three remaining columns. As the orders were being delivered, Cymelange wove an air tunnel of his own. He directed it into the tent of Premer Cardijja.

"This is Cymelange," the mage announced, knowing that Cardijja would not be able to answer him without a mage present. "We have come under attack and are returning to the camp. We have been unable to identify our attackers and have found no signs of giant spiders. I want your troops to penetrate the jungle and create a corridor for my returning men. You will know our locations from the bright projectiles."

Cymelange dropped the air tunnel and frowned as he thought about his own words. He gazed upward at the glowing orbs that provided the light to the jungle. The spells had to be cast almost continuously to provide light to the jungle. What he saw was proof that the other six columns no longer existed. Only four glowing orbs hung in the sky over the jungle. He cursed himself for not noticing it earlier.

"We need to return to camp immediately," he said loudly. "Remain calm and alert, but do not dally."

The column reversed direction with the column leader passing by the other mages and taking the lead once again. The reversal placed Cymelange near the vanguard of the column. The black-cloaks hurried along, nervousness clearly beginning to show in the faces of the mages. A few minutes later the column halted abruptly. Cymelange pushed his way forward to see why they had stopped. He stared in horror at the giant web stretched across the trail. Stuck on the web were the bodies of the two mages that had been left behind. At least Cymelange suspected that that was whom the bodies belonged to. The bodies were completely encased in webbing. Only a few glimpses of black cloaks were visible through the white webbing. Cymelange's eyes rose upward as he tried to see the top of the web. He could not.

"Burn it!" he shouted.

Flames shot from over a dozen mages and tore at the web. The web seemed to sway away protectively from the fire, but Cymelange noted that the strands of the web did melt where the flames were most intense. He watched with morbid curiosity, as holes grew larger in the web. When the holes were large enough for men to pass through, Cymelange barked commands for the column to proceed. He let men

pass him as his eyes searched for the spiders. The stench of burning flesh fell heavy across the trail as the two encased mages began to burn. Cymelange crinkled his nose against the odor and followed the other mages through the web.

Cymelange's eyes constantly scanned the jungle on both sides for any sign of the spiders, but he could not find them. This irritated him as much as it frightened him. As the column was hurrying towards the camp, a slight noise off to his right caught Cymelange's attention. The noise had sounded like a human voice, but he could not be sure. As his eyes scanned the foliage for enemies, Cymelange tripped and fell. He hit the ground hard and something smashed into his jaw. He cursed loudly and shook his head to clear his vision. He looked uncomprehendingly at the boot on the ground. As he rose to his knees, Cymelange recognized the body of the mage stretched out before him.

Cymelange looked up and saw the trail littered with the bodies of his comrades. None of them appeared to be moving. He frowned in confusion as his eyes swept over the bodies. Suddenly he froze, his eyes landing on the small dart stuck in the neck of the mage before him. He bit his lip with sudden understanding. He immediately went prone on the ground as his mind raced with the explanation to the quiet disappearances of the other columns. The darts obviously delivered an extremely fast-acting poison, but those darts would have to be delivered by people, not spiders. There had to be Fakarans nearby.

Cymelange feigned death, as he remained frozen on the ground. His eyes tried to scan the jungle, but he could see little other than the closest plants. He listened intently for sounds of the enemy, but the jungle had grown deathly quiet. The brightening spells began to fail, and darkness reclaimed the jungle, but Cymelange remained quiet and still. He was not sure how much time had passed, but he suddenly heard a chilling sound behind him. Risking detection, he rolled onto his side and gazed into the darkness.

At first he could see nothing, but the sounds grew louder. A series of clicks and the rustle of leaves indicated movement nearby, but the jungle was a wall of blackness. As the sounds grew closer, Cymelange felt the need to move away. He cautiously rose to his knees and then stood. However long he had remained feigning death, his eyes were now more accustomed to the darkness. As he stood he frowned, the whole jungle appearing to move before him. He stared in confusion trying to figure out what he was seeing. It took a few moments for the image to fully register with his brain. Giant spiders were harvesting the slain bodies on the trail. His mouth fell open and his eyes widened as he stared at the massive creatures. His limbs began to shake uncontrollably and Cymelange fought for control over his muscles.

He never even thought of attacking the spiders magically. Instead, Cymelange turned and ran towards the encampment. He ran as fast as his legs could carry him, without regard to the noise that he made, or the pain from the plants whipping at his legs and arms. He heard sounds from behind him and imagined that the giant spiders were racing after him. Fear coursed through his body. His heart pounded maddeningly, and he gasped for breath. He had no idea what type of people might inhabit the jungle, but his mind pictured tiny human-like creatures with long blowpipes pressed to their lips.

When he finally saw the Motangan encampment, his legs had just about given out. He raced past the perimeter sentries and collapsed on the ground, gasping for breath. Pain seared his chest and raced down his arms. Perspiration flooded from his body and his mind began to swim hazily. A crowd gathered around him, but he neither cared nor paid any notice to them. He tried to rest his pounding heart and fill his bursting lungs with air.

"Cymelange?" questioned a familiar voice. "What is going on? Where are the rest of your mages?"

The black-cloak gazed up into the face of Premer Cardijja. Cymelange's lips curled back to bare his teeth.

"Where are the troops I requested?" spat the mage. "I sent the air tunnel into your tent. You could have saved my men."

"I have not been in my tent since you left," shrugged the premer. "I have been trying to calm a revolt. Tell me what happened. Was it the spiders?"

"Small creatures," Cymelange gasped as his throat constricted. "People. Poison blow darts. Spiders. Webs. We must leave the jungle."

"He is delirious," commented General Luggar. "He needs a healer."

"He is the last of the healers," scowled Premer Cardijja. "We need to get him to my tent."

The premer waved his arm to direct some of the nearby soldiers to carry the mage's body, but General Luggar reached out and placed a hand on the premer's arm. Cardijja looked questioningly at his friend and saw Luggar nod towards the mage. The premer looked down and saw Cymelange's face contorted in death. The eyes still stared openly in horror, and the mage's teeth were still bared, but the black-cloak was no longer among the living.

* * *

Emperor Vand sat on his throne, staring into space. A dozen black-cloaks stood in a knot off to one side, talking among themselves, while Premer Tzargo stood before the emperor, patiently awaiting word from Khadora. The door to the throne room opened and everyone's eyes moved to see who was entering. They quickly averted

their eyes as the telltale clicking of claws tapped across the floor towards the emperor. Vand alone continued to stare as the demon approached.

The demon stopped well behind Premer Tzargo. With a hideous snarl, the creature rolled the head of Premer Shamal across the floor. The head struck the steps leading up to the throne. It bounced back and came to rest with Shamal's open eyes staring up at the ceiling.

"Report," commanded the emperor.

"The army of Shamal no longer exists," growled the demon. "Those who defeated him will soon converge on Vandegar. The Torak leads an army of Khadorans, elves, and Chula. They will be numerous."

"We must order Cardijja to come here immediately," urged Premer Tzargo. "My men are the best in the army, but we are only fifty thousand strong. We need Cardijja's men."

"Cardijja is finding Angragar," the emperor shook his head. "That is more important to me. Your men will defend Vandegar."

"But we are only fifty thousand," objected the premer. "I need more men against such a large army."

"More?" scowled Vand. "Have I not given you control over a million men? You continue to disappoint me, Tzargo. I have let you plan the invasions and divide your forces as you saw fit. We have had nothing but failure after failure. Tell me why you should continue to live."

"I am loyal to you," Premer Tzargo uttered quickly. "I have devoted my life to protecting you. I cannot be blamed for Doralin's cowardice or Shamal's failure. You approved of both of them for their positions. I am only asking for more men to better protect you."

"How many more men do you need?" asked the emperor.

"As many as I can get," Tzargo replied with a hint of hope in his voice.

"Two times your current number?" questioned the emperor. "Ten times?"

Premer Tzargo frowned at the emperor's questions. He knew that there was no chance for either of the options offered to him. Only Cardijja's army remained to draw from, and that could hardly be equivalent to ten times Tzargo's troops.

"I will make use of every man that you can get me," promised Premer Tzargo. "You will be protected."

Vand smiled darkly at the premer. "Then I shall make your army increase tenfold, " he said softly. "Go and gather your men, Tzargo. Arrange all fifty thousand in a line that I may bless them each individually. When I am done, your army will be invincible."

Premer Tzargo swallowed hard as he realized that the emperor

was going to make each of his soldiers into a hellsoul. A shudder ran through his body, but he bowed respectfully and backed out of the chamber.

Chapter 34

Escape from the Jungle

General Luggar entered the premer's tent and found Cardijja staring at the map of Fakara. The premer looked up briefly to see who was entering, but he quickly returned his attention to the hand drawn markings on the map.

"There are no markings on the map for this jungle," commented General Luggar as he crossed the room and stood alongside the premer. "Your interest in the map tells me that you are planning to retreat."

"Is there any other option?" sighed Cardijja. "The men are frightened like children. Sending the mages out to battle the spiders was a great mistake on my part. The men know that there are no healers left for them."

"You had no reason to believe that all of the mages would die," sympathized the general. "Do not blame yourself."

"Who am I to blame then?" scowled the premer. "I lead this army. All responsibility falls to me. I have managed to send my men into a deathtrap. No, Luggar, I must blame myself. I can hardly blame the men for wanting to run from this infernal jungle. Come morning, we are leaving here and heading westward. Let Premer Tzargo find the lost city of Angragar. My task now is to preserve as many of my men as possible."

"You can't be serious?" gasped General Luggar. "Tzargo will kill you for defying him, and that would be getting off easy. If Vand hears of it, you will be slowly tortured in public to make a spectacle of you."

"I fully understand the consequences of my actions," shrugged Cardijja, "but I will not throw away the lives of my men."

"Your men will just be sent out under a new premer after you are killed," Luggar pointed out. "You will not be saving them from anything. You are a premer, Cardijja. Your task is to lead your armies to defeat the enemy. I do not understand this change in you."

"You will come to understand it," frowned the premer. "I suspect that you will be chosen to replace me. When your promotion is given, remember well what happens here in the jungle this night."

"What do you mean?" questioned the general. "When what happens?"

"When the spiders attack, Luggar," replied the premer. "Surely you are not foolish enough to think that we will be allowed to sleep

until morning? Our enemy is much too clever for that."

"You think the spiders are intelligent?" asked the general. "You speak of them as if they were in league with our enemies."

"I am sure of it," nodded Cardijja. "Oh, the reports from the soldiers we sent out might lead one to believe that the spiders merely saw us as intruders and a food source, but the deaths of the mages make me see things differently. Cymelange's mages may have been pompous and obnoxious, but they were intelligent men. They went into the jungle specifically to find the spiders. They could not have been trapped as the soldiers were."

"Perhaps the mages did not die because of the spiders," offered Luggar. "Cymelange spoke of small people and poison darts."

"Exactly," Cardijja nodded exaggeratedly. "He spoke of people and spiders in the same breath. Now tell me, why is it these small people can survive among the spiders that killed six thousand of our soldiers? Have you considered the implications of that thought?"

General Luggar remained silent for several moments and finally shook his head. "I see where your thoughts are coming from," admitted the general, "but you have no proof of it. Perhaps the spiders do normally feed on the small people, but couldn't resist the men we sent into the jungle."

"Inconceivable," countered Cardijja. "The spiders were capable of capturing almost every one of the soldiers that we sent in. No small people could live in such an environment unless the spiders were their allies. No, Luggar, the spiders are intelligent, and they will attack before dawn. They are merely waiting until our fear is at its apex. That fear will work to their advantage. Instead of facing two hundred thousand men ready to defend this camp, they will be attacking two hundred thousand soldiers trying to flee from the jungle. Our losses will be severe."

"If you truly believe this," frowned the general, "you should be ordering the men out of the jungle immediately."

"I would have done that an hour ago," sighed the premer, "except for the reports from the sentries. It appears that Fakaran horsemen are prowling the plains outside the jungle. They would like nothing better than to strike us under the cover of darkness once again."

"And the Fakarans have not attempted to enter the jungle?" asked General Luggar.

"Not even a single probe," Cardijja shook his head. "It is as if they already know where we are and what we are up against. Can you think of any other reason for them to be riding along the edge of the jungle in plain sight of our sentries?"

"No," admitted Luggar. "Such an appearance is most certainly designed to keep us here for the night."

“Precisely,” nodded Cardijja. “They sit out there like vultures waiting to pick off the weak and wounded as we run from the jungle.”

“What are you going to do about it?” asked General Luggar.

“I am not sure,” conceded the premer, “but something must be done soon. We cannot allow the Fakarans to drive our strategy. There was a long strand of forest before we reached the jungle. Do you remember it?”

“I do,” nodded the general. “We discussed moving into it if the Fakaran horsemen returned before we reached the jungle. It ran to the north for as far as I could see.”

“I want to devise a plan to reach it,” declared the premer.

“That is a half-day’s march,” frowned the general. “We would lose thousands of men to the horsemen before we reached it.”

“I know,” sighed Cardijja, “but what else can we do? If we stay in the jungle, we must fight huge spiders and little people with poison darts. The very thought terrorizes our men. If we merely flee to the plains, we will fall prey to the tribes and their horsemen. We will lose a tremendous number of men to reach the forest, but the jungle creatures will not pursue us, and the horsemen will be at an extreme disadvantage there.”

“Our men could certainly hold their own in the forests,” Luggar nodded in agreement. “In fact, that is just the terrain we need to defeat the horsemen. If we can lure them into the forest after us, we can turn this war around.”

“That is what I was thinking,” smiled the premer. “I would prefer to wait until daylight to cross the plains, but I fear that will not be an option.”

“Daylight would allow more of our men to survive the attacks from the horsemen,” agreed the general, “but you indicated that you thought the spiders would not wait until dawn.”

“They won’t,” assured the premer, “and that is what bothers me. I am looking for a way out of the jungle without exposing the men to the tribesmen.”

General Luggar gazed down at the map and frowned in silence. Finally, he tapped his finger on the map.

“What if we start moving the men along the edge of the jungle?” Luggar proposed. “They could stay close to the plains and move northward. That would make the open area between the jungle and the forests a bit smaller.”

“It would also spread our men out greatly,” replied the premer, “but I was thinking of doing just that when you arrived. The problem, as I see it, is that those still in this camp when the spiders strike will most certainly be lost. We will have decreased our numbers greatly.”

“Then we are best to start as soon as possible,” replied the

general. “We are going to lose thousands of men no matter what we do. This plan is the best option that we have, unless we send more men deep into the jungle. That might keep the spiders busy until dawn.”

“Where would you find the men to follow such an order?” questioned the premer. “I am not sure if you have spent much time this night walking around the camp, but I have. Our men are ready to throw down their weapons and bolt for the plains. We would have been better off if the spiders had killed all of the men sent into the jungle. Those few hundred who escaped have caused morale to plummet. If you can find some volunteers, I will take them. Otherwise, we start moving out immediately.”

“We might as well start moving out,” sighed General Luggar. “You are right about the mental state of the troops. They want out of this jungle.”

“Give the orders, Luggar,” stated Premer Cardijja. “Make sure that the men understand what we are doing. I don’t want any of them getting lost.”

Premer Cardijja followed the general out of the tent. He watched Luggar walk off and then his eyes rose skyward. The sky was a mass of black, and the smell of rain was in the air. He cursed the lack of moonlight and called for some men to dismantle his tent. For an hour the premer walked slowly around the encampment. Everywhere men were preparing to leave. He smiled sympathetically and nodded to the soldiers, but most of them averted their eyes. It was clear that they were ashamed of their fear, but Cardijja felt for them. They were trained soldiers, but none of their training had prepared them for what this jungle held. He offered words of optimism and support to the soldiers, and some of them reacted with false bravado, but most of the soldiers merely nodded and smiled in return. Cardijja had become much like a father to most of the soldiers. He was known to be strict and severe with punishment, but he was always considered fair, and the men appreciated that.

By the time Cardijja reached the sentries at the western edge of the encampment, a long line of soldiers had already started to leave the camp northward. An hour later screams ripped through the camp from the east. Cardijja hurried towards the eastern perimeter to verify his suspicions. He met General Luggar half way there.

“Now we will see if you are right,” commented the general. “I have ordered horses readied.”

“It is sooner than I would have hoped,” frowned the premer. “With this foul sky it is hard to tell how late it really is. Let’s see what this disruption is all about.”

The premer and the general hurried eastward. They were still far

from the perimeter when they halted. The screams ripped through the air, and soldiers ran for their lives. Cardijja squinted into the darkness. He saw movement, but he could not identify anything other than red-clad soldiers running past him.

"Look!" gasped Luggar as he pointed off to the right.

Cardijja followed the general's finger and stared into the distance. He could not see anything but blackness. Suddenly, distant campfires appeared. Cardijja rubbed his eyes to make sense of what he was seeing. He could not imagine who would be lighting the distant campfires. It took a few moments for the truth to register. His gaze rose upward, and he saw a huge black mass moving eastward. He shuddered at the size of the spider. Campfires in the distance winked out as the spider's body blocked them from view.

"Others are coming towards us," Luggar shouted with fear. "We need to retreat now."

Cardijja swiveled his head and saw the large blobs of black coming out of the darkness of the jungle. Some soldiers on the perimeter tried to attack the creatures, but most of the men turned and ran, their screams joining the chorus from all over the camp. The surge of retreating soldiers nearly mobbed the premer and the general. Cardijja grabbed Luggar by the arm and pulled him.

"To the horses," he shouted over the screaming. "Our men cannot fight such beasts."

The officers ran along with the retreating soldiers. When they reached the area where the premer's tent had stood, they mounted their horses and raced across the encampment to the west. They halted at the edge of the jungle as terrified soldiers tried to flee onto the plains. The sentries forcibly corralled the fleeing soldiers and forced them to join the column heading northward. Cardijja swiveled in his saddle and viewed the terror-stricken campground with disgust. Fleeing soldiers were knocked down and trampled by others. Some men became human infernos as they stumbled into fire pits and ignited themselves.

"We waited too long," General Luggar said softly.

"We moved as quickly as we could," Cardijja snapped while inwardly conceding that the general was correct. "If we had not already begun the evacuation, we might have lost everything."

* * *

General Luggar rode towards the vanguard of the column, the soldiers stepping off the beaten trail to make way for the officer. When he reached Premer Cardijja, he slowed alongside him.

"Are the spiders still attacking?" the premer asked, his voice weary with fatigue.

"Only the stragglers," reported the general. "It does make the men

keep up with the column."

"Delightful," scowled Cardijja. "How many did we lose?"

"It is hard to tell," sighed Luggar. "Maybe thirty or forty thousand."

"Forty thousand?" gasped Cardijja.

"And half of your generals," nodded Luggar. "The spiders seemed to go out of their way to pursue anyone riding a horse. I had to run from several of them."

"And we have not even crossed the plain yet," frowned the premer as he looked at up at the lightening sky. "I think we should begin that portion of the trip within the hour."

"I will see to it," offered the general.

Cardijja watched General Luggar ride forward. The premer pulled his horse to the side of the trail at the first opportunity and allowed the column to march past him. He gazed at the weary soldiers as they passed by, their shoulders slumped and their heads hung low in exhaustion. Even one hundred and sixty thousand strong, they barely resembled an army any more. Cardijja closed his eyes and sat patiently waiting for the order to exit the jungle.

An hour later the order was passed along the column. Cardijja opened his eyes and let in the light of dawn. The Motangan army started filtering out of the jungle. Premer Cardijja patted his horse forward and broke through the last remaining jungle plants to emerge onto the plain. His head swiveled from left to right as a long line of red-clad soldiers emerged from the jungle and headed westward across the open plain. He spurred his horse into action and rode across the line of soldiers, shouting as he rode.

"There is a long day's march ahead of us," he shouted, "but a good night's sleep at the end of it. March lively and cross as quickly as you can, but keep together. There are tribesmen out here."

The soldiers immediately quickened their step, but Cardijja frowned when their enthusiasm only lasted a few minutes. The men were weary and at the end of their strength. They needed sleep before they fought anything. Cardijja wheeled his horse around and rode out ahead of the soldiers. When he was well ahead of them, he turned to gaze upon them. He saw another rider approaching and soon recognized General Luggar.

"It is not wise for you to be so far from the army," advised the general as he caught up to the premer.

"It is wise to have a scout out front," retorted Cardijja. "I want to see if the tribesmen are coming."

"Let me be the scout," offered Luggar.

"Where do you get your strength from?" asked the premer. "You have been running around more than I have. You should be dead on

your feet."

"I caught some sleep last night," shrugged the general. "While you were planning our escape, I was napping peacefully. I wish you had gotten some sleep. It will be a long day."

"We will ride together," declared the premer. "Two sets of eyes are better than one."

The two officers rode for hours far out in front of their men. Their eyes constantly scanned the horizon looking for any signs of the Fakaran horsemen. High sun came and went, and the premer began to feel good about his decision to evacuate the jungle. It appeared as though they had fooled the Fakarans and slipped away from the trap that had been laid for them. As the sun began to dip towards the peaks of the mountains, the officers came to a small rise. They rode to the summit and halted.

"The forest!" exclaimed General Luggar pointing to the west. "We have made it."

"So we have," grinned the premer. "I wish there was a god to offer up praise to."

"You do not believe that Vand is a god?" asked the general. "You truly do not care much for your life. What has happened to you, old friend? You were never so skeptical before."

"I don't want to talk about it," sighed the premer as he swiveled in his saddle.

As the premer turned to look back at his army his mouth fell open, and he cursed loudly. General Luggar turned to see what had caused the premer such alarm. Far to the east a huge dust cloud rose over the plain. Barely visible in the distance were thousands of horses charging from both directions. The Fakarans were decimating the tail end of the Motangan column.

"Those cowardly dogs," spat the general. "They are murdering our men while we are in retreat."

"That does not make them cowardly," Cardijja sighed in frustration. "Actually it is a brilliant move. Had they attacked the vanguard, you and I could have warned the men to prepare for an attack. Instead they hit us at our weakest position. We must learn to expect the unexpected from the Fakarans. Ride out to the column. I want the first two thirds of the men to continue onward towards the forest. The last third is to stand and fight."

"They must all stand and fight," objected the general. "You cannot throw a third of your army away."

"Follow my orders," snapped the premer. "The men are too tired and weak from hunger to fight. We can sacrifice a third of the men to save two thirds, or we can lose them all. I intend to save those that I can. Move out."

General Luggar saluted formally and rode to the east. Premer Cardijja watched in rage as the Fakarans charged over and over again. The column of Motangans began to get visibly smaller as the horsemen worked their way westward leaving thousands of bodies in their wake. Eventually the Motangan army splintered into two groups. The large group hurried westward while the small group spread out in a semicircle facing east. Cardijja wanted to bow his head in prayer for the brave men that were offering up their lives to help their brethren, but he refused to accept Vand as a god, and he knew no other god. Instead, he sat in stony silence as he watched his men defend against the Fakaran horsemen.

An hour later the vanguard of the Motangan army ran over the small knoll. Cardijja waved them onward, pointing to the forest not far to the west. Tears came unbidden to his eyes as he watched the slaughter of the defenders down on the plain to the east. Their arc of defense grew smaller with each Fakaran charge until none of the Motangans were left. Expecting the horsemen to pursue the rest of the Motangan army, Premer Cardijja was surprised to see the Fakarans turn to the south and ride away. Moments late General Luggar arrived atop the knoll.

"The Fakarans retreated," Cardijja remarked softly.

Luggar turned in his saddle and stared down at the plain. His eyes widened in astonishment.

"Why?" he asked. "Why did they not pursue the rest of us?"

"I don't know," replied Cardijja, "but the action does not bring comfort to me."

"You would have preferred for them to continue attacking us?" asked the general.

"No," Cardijja shook his head, "but their departure puzzles me."

"Maybe they are only interested in attacking the weakest portions of our army?" suggested Luggar.

"That is possible," shrugged the premer, "and it would be a wise strategy, but I am forcing myself to expect the unexpected. How large is this strand of forest?"

"It is not charted," answered the general, "but it is huge. What we saw riding eastward was that it extended far to the north of the pass we came through. Do you think they plan to attack us again when we leave the forest?"

"That is a possibility," nodded the premer. "If that is their plan, the Fakarans will be in for a surprise. Once our men are rested, an attack like today's will cost the horsemen greatly. They should have pursued us while we were still tired. The ease of their victory today will make them unprepared for a true Motangan defense."

Premer Cardijja wheeled his horse around and headed down the

western slope of the knoll. General Luggar rode alongside, his previous disagreement with the premer behind him. As the sun was disappearing from the sky, they rode into the coolness of the sevemore forest. The Motangans had moved well into the forest before setting up camp. Campfires dotted the woods, and several deer were already being cooked over the fires. Cardijja smiled broadly as he saw the spirits of his men returning. When he made his way to the center of the camp, he saw that his tent was just being erected. He dismounted and handed his reins to a soldier. Luggar dismounted as well.

"This is like paradise," Luggar smiled before touching the premer on the arm and looking at him seriously. "I want to apologize for my words earlier, Cardijja. As things turned out, your decision was a wise one. I probably would have lost the whole army by making the men take a stand. I am sorry for doubting you."

"You followed my orders," smiled Cardijja. "I ask no more of any man. My decisions will not always be right, but I will always do what I think is best for the majority of the men. That jungle was a trap designed just for us. We are fortunate to have survived it with half of our men. It was meant to destroy us totally. Do not underestimate these Fakarans. What we were told on Motanga was nothing more than lies to boost our morale. I would have preferred the truth."

"So that is why you have turned from Vand and Tzargo?" frowned Luggar. "You feel that they are using you?"

"Of course they are using me," chuckled Cardijja. "That has always been plain to any man with half a brain. It is the way of rulers. They use the little people to obtain their goals. A soldier is used to being used," he continued, "but not abused. Doralin, Shamal, and myself were kept in the dark about the true nature of the people that we are tasked to destroy. We were led to believe that they were savages that needed to be exterminated."

"And you don't think they are?" inquired the general.

"Their attacks have been brilliant," answered the premer. "They have stood up against a vastly superior force and suffered few casualties. If we had been expecting such a tough fight, the outcomes may have been different. That is what I hold against Vand and Tzargo. They have wasted thousands of Motangan lives and for what purpose?"

"Is it not our task to win the battles?" frowned Luggar. "Sure they could have been more straightforward about the enemy, but that is hardly a valid reason to rebel against them."

"We could have conquered these lands with few losses," retorted Cardijja, "but that is not enough for Vand. He wants these people exterminated, and he doesn't care how many of us die to accomplish it. Don't you see, Luggar? He cares for our men as little as he cares for

the enemy.”

Chapter 35

Forest of Death

The Motangan encampment quickly succumbed to sleep. The weary and exhausted soldiers barely finished eating before nodding off. General Luggar walked around the camp and then entered the premer's tent. Premer Cardijja was fast asleep, and the general decided to catch some sleep himself. He left the premer's tent and was walking through the sleeping camp when shouting came from the east. He started to run towards the noise when he heard more shouting from the west. The general stopped short and tilted his head, listening for the words of the shouting soldiers. Within moments he heard shouts from every direction. The cries of battle filled the air, and the general raced back to the premer's tent. He grabbed a soldier and ordered him to find out what was happening. He tore open the flap and found the premer rising from his nap.

"What is it, Luggar?" asked the premer.

"It is an attack," reported the general. "I just sent a man to investigate. It appears to be an attack from all sides. I was going to check myself, but I thought it wiser to awaken you."

The premer nodded and belted on his sword. He strode out of the tent, and the general followed. They stood silently outside the tent listening to the sounds.

"Archers," commented Cardijja. "Did you say the attack was from all quarters?"

"It is," nodded the general.

"Issue orders to pull the troops inward," commanded the premer. "We may be surrounded, but it does not sound as if the enemy is charging. Create a tight circle, Luggar. I want shields on the outside and archers on the inside."

General Luggar ran off to deliver the premer's orders. Moments later a soldier ran towards the tent and halted in front of the premer. He was clearly out of breath, and Cardijja waited patiently for the message.

"General Luggar sent me out to discover the nature of the attack," reported the soldier. "We are under attack by archers."

"I gathered as much," nodded Cardijja. "Are there any horsemen about?"

"No horses that anyone can see," the soldier shook his head. "Some of the men swear that they saw elves, but that can't be, can it?"

Premer Cardijja subconsciously bit his lip as he pondered the question. There should be no elves in Fakara, at least according to the spies, but those same spies had missed other important things, like giant spiders and small humans with blowpipes. He had been informed of the fall of the Island of Darkness to the elves, so he was certain that they had joined up with the enemy, but what would they be doing in this particular forest? Suddenly the answer dawned to the premer.

"It is elves attacking," shouted General Luggar as he raced towards the tent. "What in the blazes are the elves doing here?"

"Killing us," Cardijja said calmly. "The attack will not last long, but the elves will be back later."

"Explain yourself," frowned the general as he waved the soldier away.

"They mean to keep us from sleeping," explained the premer. "That is what the enemy always intended to do. Make us weary with exhaustion, and pick us off in small slivers until we are all dead. What a deviously brilliant plan. It doesn't matter how large an army we have. They will continue to harass us until we are all dead. The horsemen sleep while the spiders attack. When they wake up they attack us on the plains, then they sleep and the elves fire arrows into our camp all night. No doubt the horsemen will be back tomorrow."

"We cannot allow that," scowled the general. "We must counterattack."

"Counterattack?" echoed the premer. "And how do you suggest we do that? Have you ever tried finding elves in the forest? Why do you think the kruls were created? I will tell you. It was not just for their strength that the mages developed them. They also have a keen sense of smell, particularly suited to hunting runaway elves. When the alarms go off on the Island of Darkness, what are the rules?"

"The army seals the city, and the kruls are sent out to hunt the escapees," the general nodded in defeat.

"Precisely," replied the premer. "Oh, some soldiers will be sent out on patrols as well, but they are mostly to herd the elves to where the kruls can find them."

"So what do we do?" asked the general as the sounds of battle diminished. "We cannot just stay here and be targets for the elves."

"No, we can't," agreed the premer, "but I am at a loss as to what we should do. We could organize patrols and send them out to hunt the elves, but I doubt that they will return to camp. I wonder how many elves we are facing?"

"There is no way to know," shrugged the general as he followed the premer into the tent. "Do you want me to go out and ask them?" he added sarcastically.

“Wouldn’t it be nice if they would answer?” replied the premer as he grabbed a torch and placed it into a holder near the table.

Cardijja stared at the map in silence for some time. General Luggar fidgeted, clearly uncomfortable with the silence.

“The question, Luggar,” the premer finally said, “is how did the elves get here? If they were here when we marched by this forest on the way to the jungle, why didn’t they attack then? And why didn’t our men find them when they hunted the deer?”

“They must not have been here then,” shrugged Luggar.

“Then where were they hiding?” asked Cardijja. “Certainly not in the jungle. They would have attacked us there as well. They didn’t come from the east across the plains. We would have seen them.”

“So they came from the west,” shrugged the general. “What difference does it make? The important thing is that they have us surrounded. It doesn’t matter a bit how they got here.”

“That is where you are wrong, Luggar,” smiled the premer. “How they got here matters a great deal. I will tell you why in a moment. What I need to understand is if they have been around since Bakhai arrived in our camp. The elf that was trying to kill him was the first hint of elves in this land. Now you have always been suspicious of Bakhai, so you are the perfect person to ask this of. Were the elves around our camp when Bakhai came to us?”

General Luggar had never trusted the Fakaran youngster, but he knew that Cardijja had a soft spot in his heart for the lad. He remembered that patrols had been sent out in search of the elf, and those patrols turned up nothing.

“I don’t think so,” answered the general. “Bakhai is clearly not an elf, and I think he was truly afraid of the elf that chased him, but I still do not trust him. Why are you asking?”

“Because I suspect that the elves might have been responsible for the insects that attacked us in our sleep,” explained Cardijja.

“Elven magic?” questioned the general. “Why would they do such a thing? Why not attack us as they are doing tonight?”

“Because our troops were fresh at the time,” reasoned the premer. “I suspect that the total number of elves attacking us is rather small. Any real attack on us would be a deadly defeat for them, so they aim to deprive us of sleep. They make us afraid and weaker through exhaustion.”

“Your theory makes sense,” nodded the general, “but what does that have to do with Bakhai?”

“It is almost as if the Fakarans know where we are going,” explained the premer. “If Bakhai has told the Fakarans what he told me, then all we can do is stay here and fight it out with the Fakarans. I don’t mind telling you that I think our prospects are not very good.”

“I am confused,” admitted the general. “On one hand you state that the number of elves is small, and on the other you rate our chances as low. How can this be?”

“Because the elves are not our only enemy,” replied Cardijja. “All the elves have to do is deny us sleep. The horsemen will finish the job. We can attack the elves tonight and maybe cause them grievous harm. Maybe not. But in doing so, we will get no sleep for another night. Our men are barely functioning now. Come morning when the horsemen attack, we may be slaughtered.”

“And the options are?” frowned Luggar. “Are you suggesting that we nod off and die in our sleep?”

“No,” Cardijja shook his head. “I am thinking about moving onward so that we are not here in the morning when the horsemen arrive.”

“And go where?” Luggar asked with growing frustration.

“To the Valley of Bones,” answered Premer Cardijja as he tapped the map with his finger. “Bakhai said that it was a defensible position. That is why I need to know if he has revealed our conversations to the Fakarans.”

“Now I understand,” nodded the general. “If Bakhai was a spy, the Fakarans will expect you to go to the Valley of Bones. Your concerns are warranted. I do not trust the lad.”

“I understand that,” conceded the premer, “but even if he was a spy, would he have been smart enough to steer us on such a wild path as the one that we have taken?”

“Inconceivable,” Luggar shook his head. “I detected no sign of intelligence in the boy. I do not think he was truly a spy in the sense that we think of the term, but I do believe that he would spill his guts to anyone who asked. He may have mentioned that he told you about the Valley of Bones, but there is no way that the Fakarans could be expecting us to go there. He mentioned so many places to us. Why would that one stand out in their minds?”

“I have my doubts as to his intelligence,” sighed Cardijja, “but I see no other path for us. We cannot stay here if the horsemen will arrive in the morning. That would mean certain destruction for our army. That much I know for sure. Where else could we hope to get to?”

“We would have to spend many nights in the forests on a return to Meliban,” answered the general, “and I suspect that the elves would follow us and attack each night. We also would never reach Meliban without days upon the plains, and the horsemen would take their turn at attacking us every night. The Valley of Bones appears to be our only chance. If we can fortify the valley, at least the men can sleep. How will you get past the elves?”

“We will purposely suffer one more attack,” explained the premer as the sounds of fighting died down. “Let the elves believe that we are settling in for the night despite their attacks. I do not want them alerting the horsemen to our plans to vacate this campsite. As soon as the next attack ends, I want the entire army up and moving northward. We will spread out in a swath across the entire stretch of forest. There will be no place for the elves to hide as we march towards the Valley of Bones. Those that are towards our north will be attacked by the vanguard.”

“They will also attack us from behind,” warned the general.

“I have no doubt that they will,” nodded the premer, “but we will have to endure it. It seems that I am always willing to slice off a section of my army to save the rest of it, but I see no other way.”

“Nor do I,” agreed the general. “I will see that the word is passed. You should get some sleep while you can. The elves will not reach this far into the camp.”

* * *

Princess Alahara dropped the air tunnel and stood silently. She looked questioningly at Tamar and Bakhai alongside her.

“Premer Cardijja is an intelligent man,” commented Tamar. “He has correctly determined what our plans are. We are not strong enough to take on his whole army. Do we dare to let him travel to the Valley of Bones with so many men?”

“The Valley of Bones is where we want him,” replied Bakhai. “That is why I told him about it. I am more concerned for the elves at this point. If he spreads his men out to the width of the forest, many elves will die trying to slow down his march. He will force them onto the plains, and they will be easily seen.”

“No they won’t,” smiled Princess Alahara. “Humans should never trust their eyes when they are up against the elves.”

“Illusions?” asked Tamar.

“Illusions,” nodded the elven princess. “What the Motangans think is the edge of the forest will not even be near the edge. We will create an illusion of plains and extend it into the forest on both sides. Our people can hide in that part of the forest that the humans cannot see.”

Tamar grinned broadly. “You have adapted to the ways of the elves quickly,” he commented. “King Avalar would be proud.”

Alahara smiled at Tamar, but her eyes saddened as she turned to Bakhai. “This premer sounds as if he cares for you, Bakhai. You accomplished much during your infiltration. Why are you sad?”

“I do not know,” admitted Bakhai. “When he began to talk about me, I feared that he would see the Valley of Bones as the trap that it is meant to be.”

“What does it matter what the premer thinks?” asked Tamar. “Our task is to kill them all. Perhaps we would be wise to ignite the forest and force the Motangans onto the plains. The Fakarans could then charge into their ranks and destroy them all.”

Princess Alahara’s eyebrow rose as she stared at Tamar, but Bakhai shook his head vigorously.

“No,” Bakhai said adamantly. “Our task is not to kill them all. Our goal is to end this invasion. If the Astor had believed in such tactics in the past, there would be no Fakaran horsemen now. They would have all been destroyed in the war with the Jiadin. We kill only because we must kill to win, but if there is a better way, I know that Rejji would want to try it.”

“Is that why you wanted to lure them into the Valley of Bones?” asked Alahara. “Are you trying to duplicate what Rejji did to Grulak’s men?”

“It might work again,” Bakhai shrugged unconvincingly. “It is worth a try.”

“Not with over a hundred thousand men,” Alahara shook her head. “When Grulak’s men were defeated, they were already mentally prepared to quit. They were severally demoralized and ready to end the fighting, and there were only twenty thousand of them. Even then we had to let them go free. We cannot afford to do that with the Motangans. Cardijja’s army is larger than Grulak’s ever was, and there is another army at Vandegar that must be defeated.”

“And Cardijja’s men are only tired,” added Tamar, “not demoralized. If we give them the chance to sleep, they will attack us with a renewed vigor. We can still lose this war, Bakhai. Take nothing for granted.”

“If you burn this forest and force the Motangans onto the plains,” countered Bakhai, “the tribes can attack them, but we will lose thousands upon thousands of men to defeat them. Rejji cannot afford such losses if we are to march on Vandegar. Perhaps if I reentered the Motangan camp and spoke to Premer Cardijja, he would see the need to surrender.”

Princess Alahara frowned as she wove another air tunnel. Within minutes she had located Rejji and explained the situation to him.

“You cannot stop the Motangans from marching,” replied the Astor. “You just don’t have enough archers to halt such a massive army, and the tribes cannot attack in the forest. Cardijja will march his army into the Valley of Bones. We cannot stop him from doing so, but we can plan to make sure that he does not ever leave it. I will post the Jiadin at the western exit from the Valley of Bones. The free tribes will block the east after the Motangans are enclosed in the valley.”

“And in the meantime?” asked the elven princess.

“Show me what the elves can do to an enemy, Mistake,” grinned the Astor. “Harass them. Kill them. Terrorize them. Do not unnecessarily endanger the elves, but lessen the number of Motangans that must be dealt with in the Valley of Bones.”

“Will you be at the valley?” asked Alahara.

“Everyone will be at the Valley of Bones,” answered Rejji. “It is the final battle for Premer Cardijja and his men. Once the Motangans enter the valley, they will not be allowed to leave again.”

“Do not mistake these Motangans for Jiadin,” warned Alahara. “These men know how to climb cliffs. Merely sealing the exits from the valley will not contain Cardijja’s men. They have no horses to worry about.”

“That is why the elves will be needed there,” replied Rejji. “Your archers will hold the high ground and deny any escape up the cliffs. The Qubari will seal the exits, and the tribes will prepare to charge into the valley to finish off the Motangans. Before two nights have passed, the Motangan army will no longer exist.”

“What if I ask for their surrender?” Bakhai said into the air tunnel. “Maybe we can avoid all of this killing.”

“No, Bakhai,” Rejji replied sternly. “Under no circumstances are you to enter their camp. They would immediately know that you have spied on them, and I am not prepared to sacrifice my brother for such a fruitless plan. We cannot expect the surrender of such a large army. Cardijja is not a fool. If he can get sleep for his men, he can still march on Angragar and seize it for Vand.”

After agreeing to Rejji’s plan, Princess Alahara dropped the air tunnel and called for the mages. She explained what she wanted in terms of illusions and then called for a meeting of the unit leaders. The elven officers gathered around, and the princess explained the plan. Bakhai quickly grew bored with the discussion. He rose and paced the forest, inexplicably being drawn towards the Motangan encampment. As he stood in the darkness peering at the Motangan sentries from the cover of a tree, Cardijja’s words replayed in his mind. He was not entirely sure why, but Premer Cardijja appeared to be a reasonable man to Bakhai. While the Motangans had to be halted, the thought of killing them all did not sit well. Bakhai had hoped that the Valley of Bones would allow for a Motangan surrender, but no one else believed that possible, especially not the Motangans.

* * *

Premer Cardijja winced as another volley of elven arrows sailed into the camp. Scores of Motangans fell to the arrows. The red-clad soldiers fired back, but they were firing blindly. The elves were so well concealed that they might as well have been invisible.

“When will this end?” asked General Luggar. “We cannot just sit

here and endure this."

"No, we can't," agreed the premer. "I had hoped for some element of surprise when we made our move, but this attack is far longer than the last. Sound the call for the men to move northward. If we are to die, let us do it as warriors, not targets."

General Luggar signaled a soldier, and the man blew hard on his horn. As if eagerly awaiting the signal, thousands of Motangan soldiers immediately rose in the center of the encampment, shouts of war ripping through the air. The center of the camp surged to the north as the men on the perimeter stepped aside. The Motangans charged into the darkness of the forest, their voices shouting death to the hidden elves. As the men along the camp perimeter held their positions, the rest of the Motangans surged after the vanguard. They spread out at angles to encompass the entire width of the forest, or what they perceived to be the edge of the forest.

"The elves to the north must have been defeated," noted the general. "There are no more arrows coming in from that direction."

"More likely they retreated," Premer Cardijja shook his head. "Even with a good hiding spot, I would not stand in the path of this army. The elves will halt and fire at the vanguard and then retreat again. Let's mount up."

The officers mounted and rode into the center of the marching army. When the bulk of the Motangans had pushed northward, the perimeter guards folded in towards the center of the camp and became the rear guard for the advance to the north.

"The men appear more energetic than I would have expected," commented Luggar as they rode protected in the mass of Motangan soldiers.

"That will not last," replied Cardijja. "They had a small amount of sleep, but they are quickly wearing themselves out. I expect the elves will continue to harass us throughout this march northward. The sooner we reach the Valley of Bones, the better."

"And the Fakaran horsemen?" questioned the general. "Will they be waiting for us between the forest and the valley?"

"That is something that we must plan for," nodded the premer. "I have given orders to halt at the edge of the forest. At that point we should have elves only behind us. I intend to exit the forest in the daylight. I would rather suffer an elven attack at night than another devastating charge from the horsemen."

"What if we can get the elves to move from their concealment by pushing them onto the plain?" questioned the general.

"Then the elves will die," the premer said with hope in his voice. "They are excellent archers, but they must be far fewer than we are. If they leave their concealment, we will attack them and destroy them."

The officers rode on in silence for some time. The sounds of battle were evident from both the vanguard and the tail of the column. While there were no reports from the rear, the results of the battle at the front of the column were evident. A steady trail of Motangan bodies was visible to the officers even in the darkness of the forest.

“We are losing many men,” General Luggar finally said as his horse stepped over a body. “Most of the elves must be before us.”

“We are losing too many,” frowned Premer Cardijja. “I would gladly trade ten thousand men for a decent night’s sleep for the rest, but we may end up losing even more than that. These soldiers are at the end of their endurance.”

“We all are,” the general said softly. “I will be glad when this night ends, and we exit this forest of death.”

* * *

In front of the Motangan vanguard, a group of elven archers fired arrows into the advancing enemy. They started in the center of the vanguard and worked their way towards the edges of the forest where they stepped into the illusion and regrouped. The group of elves then raced northward inside the illusion while another group of elves repeated the procedure. The result was a constant attack on the Motangan vanguard, and red-clad bodies littered the forest floor.

When the elves reached the northern limit of the forest, they used the illusion to safely pass southward and join up with the rest of the elves that had been harassing the tail of the Motangan column. The Motangan army halted at the northern edge of the forest and took up a defensive posture as they waited for the sun to rise.

Chapter 36

Valley of Bones

The sun had barely risen above the horizon when Premer Cardijja gave the order to march onto the plain. Thousands of red-clad soldiers stepped hesitantly out of the forest, expecting the Fakaran horsemen to appear at any moment. When the horsemen did not appear, many of the soldiers smiled in relief. Premer Cardijja and General Luggar rode out of the forest and gazed at the yawning mouth of the valley in the distance.

"It will take more than a few hours to reach the valley," frowned General Luggar.

"I don't care if it takes all day," replied the premer, "as long as we are in the valley by sundown. I want to ride ahead and see what awaits us there. Will you join me?"

Luggar was about to object because of the danger of being so far out in front of the army, but he suddenly nodded instead.

"We might as well look at it," shrugged the general. "It is going to be our home until the men regain their strength. Do you think the Fakarans will attack as they did yesterday?"

"I had expected them to be waiting for us," admitted the premer, "but look at the lay of the land. The approach to the valley climbs steadily and the paths from the north and south are rough and creviced. The Fakarans could not easily attack us without a great deal of advance notice, and there is natural protection for our men. Our men may be tired, but they will still fight for their lives. I do not think the Fakarans care to submit to a fair fight against us. This is not ground of their choosing."

"You almost sound optimistic," commented the general.

"For the first time in days," smiled the premer, "I am optimistic. Look at the approach to the valley. Once we hold that gap, no one will get through it. I can only hope that the western entrance is as well situated. While I will hold off on my final evaluation, it is beginning to appear as though Bakhai's advice was excellent. That is why I am anxious to see the valley."

"Then let us go and see it," Luggar nodded with a hint of a smile.

The officers rode through the swarming army and had soon passed the vanguard. Even on horseback the trip into the valley took well over an hour, and that was with the horses being ridden hard. The officers slowed as the gap narrowed considerably. At the gap's

narrowest point, it turned sharply. Cardijja paused to turn around and view his army crossing the plain. There was no sign of either the horsemen or the elves. He nodded with satisfaction and continued into the valley. The narrow gap continued for a ways before it opened up into a broad valley surrounded by high cliffs. Cardijja and Luggar halted to gaze upon the huge valley.

"This is magnificent," Cardijja sighed with satisfaction. "We can hold the eastern entrance with only a thousand men, and look at the room within the valley. It is massive."

"Not much in the way of food," frowned Luggar as he gazed at the flat and empty floor of the valley.

"Not yet," Cardijja brushed off the general's pessimism, "but we have only just entered the valley. Let's ride across and check out the western approach."

The officers proceeded across the valley at a moderate pace. Cardijja pointed out a small herd of deer on the way, but Luggar still remained concerned. When they reached the western exit from the valley, they halted again. There was a straight view through the narrow gap looking down on a vast forest with a wide trail running through it.

"It's perfect," grinned Cardijja. "If we put some men up on the cliffs, we will see the Fakarans coming while they are still a long ways off. In the meantime, we can harvest the game in that forest. We have found a temporary home, Luggar. Here our men will be fed and rested and ready to resume the war."

Even Luggar smiled at the thought. "It is a defendable valley," the general conceded. "Perhaps I was wrong about Bakhai after all. Certainly no Fakaran would willingly tell us of this place."

"I miss him," Cardijja said with sadness in his voice. "Something about that lad got to me, Luggar."

"You should know better than to allow such things to happen," scolded the general. "There is no time for such feelings during war. While I may have been wrong about the lad, your attachment to him is still dangerous. Be glad that he is gone."

Cardijja frowned at his general and turned his horse to the east. Without further words, the premer started back towards his army. General Luggar followed, but he did not speak. The officers halted at the eastern gap and gazed out at the approaching army for several long minutes without speaking.

"I am only speaking to you as a friend," Luggar finally said softly. "At best, thinking of Bakhai now is only a distraction for you. You must concentrate on our position."

Slowly Cardijja's frown softened, and he nodded in agreement. "I am fortunate to have such a friend," smiled the premer. "I do not

know why my thoughts waver so."

"Because of your son," Luggar said almost in a whisper. "It is understandable."

"You know about Armen?" Cardijja said with surprise. "I thought no one knew."

"I would not be a good general if I did not strive to know everything about my superior," shrugged Luggar. "While your thoughts are understandable, you must forcibly refuse to let them take hold. We are not out of this war yet."

"You are correct, my friend," smiled the premer. "I just need sleep as you and the men do. I will be fine in the morning."

"I will have your tent erected as soon as the men arrive," promised Luggar. "I will take care of getting the camp set up."

"That is much appreciated," replied the premer. "I want three thousand men camped within sight of each of the exits. Detail some men to kill the herd of deer that we saw and prepare it for everyone. In the morning we will send men out to harvest the forest. In three day's time, we march to the east to kill the horsemen and find Angragar."

"So it shall be," Luggar smiled as he welcomed his premer back to the real world. "Go find a spot for your tent and rest. I will have the men erect the tent over you. Just let the horse graze. I will secure him later."

Premer Cardijja smiled and nodded and then turned towards the center of the valley. He chose the spot for his tent and stretched out on the ground. Within minutes he was fast asleep.

General Luggar remained at the eastern gap, issuing instructions to the men as they entered the valley. He was extremely tired, but he smiled as he welcomed the soldiers into the valley and issued instructions for setting up the camp.

Far above the floor of the valley, the Astor sat watching the Motangans entering the trap. Gathered around him were the leaders of the various groups under his command.

"There are so many of them," commented Wyant as he watched the red-clad soldiers file into the Valley of Bones. "Are you sure that we can contain them?"

"We must," answered Rejji. "There are many of them, but there will be far fewer by morning. Yltar, order the sealing of the western exit."

Bakhai watched as the Qubari shaman wove an air tunnel to someone high above the western exit. He could almost picture the huge tyriks climbing into the gap and spinning the web that would seal the entrance.

"Perhaps we can demand their surrender," suggested the Astor's

brother. “Those men could be used to rebuild Fakara.”

“We have talked about this before,” Rejji shook his head. “We cannot control a hundred thousand men, Bakhai. They could promise to surrender and then change their minds when they are fully rested. It is too dangerous.”

“Perhaps when there are less of them,” interjected Princess Alahara. “Tomorrow there will be less than half of them left.”

“Half?” balked Bakhai. “How is that possible?”

“The poison,” Mobi pointed towards the herd of deer grazing in the northern section of the valley. “Qubari warriors are already down there ensuring that each deer is poisoned. The Motangans will eat well tonight, but most of them will not survive.”

“And the elves will attack during the night,” added Princess Alahara, “just like we did in the forest. Once the eastern entrance is sealed, the Motangans will have no choice but to die.”

“Not before the Jiadin and the free tribes are in position, Mistake,” interjected Rejji. “I will take no chances with the Motangans finding a way through the webs.”

“Of course,” nodded Princess Alahara. “There is no rush.”

Yltar started talking about the Qubari warriors that would sneak into the camp after sunset. Bakhai frowned heavily and turned away from the meeting. He meandered along the rim of the valley and finally sat down in a secluded spot to gaze upon the Motangan army. He knew that Rejji and his advisors saw the need to destroy the Motangans, but he wondered why he did not feel the same way. They had, after all, come to Fakara to exterminate everyone who lived there, but his heart still sought a way to save them. Perhaps it was the time that he had spent in their camp, Bakhai reasoned. The Motangans had seemed as friendly as any group of Fakarans. He found it hard to believe that each of those men felt as Vand did. They were not necessarily evil like the leader who had sent them.

* * *

Darkness settled over the Motangan camp as campfires flared to life. Near the center of the camp, a hundred soldiers carried dead deer to a wide cleared area where other soldiers stood ready to butcher the meat. Thousands of Motangans had already gone to sleep, foregoing the meal to ease their exhaustion, but others forced themselves to stay up to conquer the grumbling of their empty stomachs. For them, sleep would have to wait a while longer.

Through the maze of sleeping bodies, a solitary figure cautiously made his way towards the center of the camp. Several soldiers looked at the lad with alarm, but they shook their heads and returned to their duties. The boy was not challenged until he reached the tent of Premer Cardijja.

“What are you doing here?” one of the sentries snapped, his hand drawing his sword menacingly.

“I have come to talk to Premer Cardijja,” Bakhai answered calmly. “You do remember his edict that I am not to be harmed?”

“That was before you vanished,” scowled the soldier.

“And has that order been rescinded since?” questioned the Fakaran.

The sentry’s face clouded with doubt, but he did not appear to soften his stance. Bakhai looked to the other sentry and shook his head. The other sentry smiled and shrugged.

“He is but a lad,” the second sentry said. “What are you expecting him to do? Do you want me to search him for weapons?”

Bakhai pulled a knife from his belt and dropped it on the ground. “That knife never threatened the premer before,” Bakhai said steadily, “and there is no reason to believe that it ever will, but I leave it here to make you at ease with my presence. Do you care to enter with me and hold my hand while I speak to the premer? I am sure that he will be touched by the gesture.”

“The premer is not to be disturbed,” barked the first sentry. “Those are General Luggar’s orders.”

Bakhai bent and retrieved his knife. He shoved it back into his belt and shrugged. “Very well then,” he bowed mockingly. “Be sure to tell Cardijja that I came by to help him save his army, but that you refused me entry.”

Bakhai turned to leave, but the second sentry’s hand streaked out and grabbed him by the shoulder, turning Bakhai around to face the sentries once again.

“What do you mean?” asked the sentry. “What do you know?”

“What I know I give to Cardijja out of friendship,” Bakhai said softly. “It is not for anyone else’s ears. He protected me one time. I felt obliged to do the same, but I see that my words are not welcome. Give him my message.”

The first sentry pointed his sword at Bakhai’s chest. “If you know something about the enemy,” he threatened, “you will speak it now.”

“I think not,” Bakhai scowled. “A friend would not have his sentries treat me in such a way. Go ahead and kill me. Everyone in this valley will be dead by dawn anyway. You will only hasten my death by mere hours.”

The second sentry physically shoved the first sentry away. “Sheath your sword,” he snarled. “Our orders were not to harm the lad. Those orders have never been rescinded.”

“We can’t just let him walk into the premer’s tent,” objected the first sentry.

“I can,” snapped the second sentry. “If you do not want to be

involved in the decision, go get some food. I can handle the premer's tent alone for a while."

The first sentry sheathed his sword and stormed off, glancing back several times to glare at Bakhai.

"He is tired," shrugged the remaining sentry. "We all are tired. We have not had sleep since you left. That is why I must ask you the importance of this visit. Premer Cardijja has not slept either. He will not be pleased to be woken."

"I think he will be very pleased," smiled Bakhai. "I would not risk my life in coming here if it was not important. You may accompany me if you wish."

"I shall," agreed the sentry. "While it is not wise to bring notice to oneself, I must protect the premer."

Bakhai nodded as the sentry pulled open the tent flap. He slipped into the dark tent and felt the sentry follow him. The interior of the tent was dark, but Cardijja's snoring showed Bakhai the way. As Bakhai crossed the tent, the sentry lit a torch. A dull glow of light lit up the tent, and Bakhai saw the premer curled up on the ground. He had not even bothered to get into bed. Bakhai walked slowly towards the premer and reached out and gently shook Cardijja's shoulder. The sentry watched closely.

"Armen?" mumbled Cardijja. "What are you doing up?"

Bakhai shook the shoulder more forcefully and Cardijja's eyes popped open. For a moment he stared into Bakhai's face uncomprehendingly. Suddenly he bolted to a sitting position, his eyes opened wide.

"Bakhai?" gasped Cardijja. "Is it really you?"

"It is me, Premer Cardijja," smiled Bakhai. "I must talk to you."

Cardijja's eyes scanned the tent and landed on the sentry. He waved his arm to dismiss the sentry, and the soldier withdrew from the tent.

"You look alright," smiled Cardijja. "What happened to you? How did you find us?"

"I have much to tell you," smiled Bakhai, "but first I need your immediate help."

"My help?" frowned the premer. "Are you in trouble?"

"No, premer," Bakhai shook his head. "You are in trouble. I need you to order your men not to eat the deer. It is poisoned. You must act quickly. Your butchers are already cutting it up."

Cardijja did not hesitate to act on Bakhai's word. He rushed to the tent flap and shouted orders to the sentry outside. He was tempted to go to the butchers and verify the lad's story, but he would not allow Bakhai to disappear again. He let the flap fall and returned to Bakhai.

"How do you know this?" he asked.

“I am Fakaran,” answered Bakhai.

“Of course you are Fakaran,” frowned Premer Cardijja. “There was never any doubt about that, but how do you know about the deer?”

“You misunderstand me,” Bakhai said as the tent flap flew to one side and General Luggar rushed in.

“Him?” scowled the general as he drew his sword and held it to Bakhai’s chest. “Is he the one that poisoned the meat?”

“Put that sword away, Luggar,” snapped the premer. “Bakhai warned me about the poisoned deer. We will know soon enough if it is true.”

“Oh, it is true,” snarled Luggar, making no attempt to sheath his sword. “One of the butchers has already died. We weren’t sure what was happening until your message arrived. And just how does Bakhai know about the poison unless he is one with the enemy?”

“Preposterous,” scowled Cardijja. “Why would he warn us then?”

“Perhaps we should let him answer,” Luggar demanded stubbornly.

“That is what I was trying to tell you,” sighed Bakhai. “I am as Fakaran as anyone can be. I am all that General Luggar suspects that I am.”

Premer Cardijja sighed heavily and slumped into a chair. He looked sadly at Bakhai and then at Luggar who was just waiting for permission to shove his sword through the lad. For several moments the scene in the tent remained frozen. Finally, Premer Cardijja spoke softly but authoritatively.

“Put the sword away, General,” he ordered. “I will not ask you again.”

“But…” frowned the general.

“Away,” snapped Cardijja. “If you cannot follow my orders without question, then remove yourself from my tent.”

General Luggar reluctantly pulled his sword back and sheathed it. Cardijja tapped the chair beside him and indicated to Bakhai to sit down. The lad crossed the tent and sat obediently in the chair.

“Tell me why my enemy has come to warn me,” Cardijja demanded softly.

“The time for dying should be over,” answered Bakhai. “When I came to your camp, I learned that you are not the evil that the prophecy foretold. You and your men are my brothers. We should not be killing each other.”

“Prophecy?” questioned the premer. “What prophecy?”

“This invasion was foretold thousands of years ago,” explained Bakhai. “We knew that Vand would seek to reclaim Angragar. We have prepared for the day that evil from the Island of Darkness would

arrive, but Vand is that evil, not you. You are just an unwitting tool."

"And you plan to stop the fighting?" sneered Luggar. "How do you propose to do that?"

"By getting Premer Cardijja to surrender," replied Bakhai. "There is no reason to die."

"Why am I not surprised?" spat the general.

"No, Bakhai," Cardijja shook his head. "My people will never surrender. We will fight to the death, and we will be victorious. If you stay by my side, I can offer you sanctuary. There is no need for you to perish, but we will conquer Angragar. That is a promise."

"Do not promise what is beyond your grasp," warned Bakhai. "Not a single one of your men will leave this valley. The Valley of Bones will be your graveyard as it was the graveyard of your ancestors. It does not have to end this way."

"Preposterous," retorted Luggar. "We have both ends of the valley secured. Your fellow horsemen will never even enter this valley. If they want to die, let them come."

Bakhai sighed and shook his head at the general. Cardijja watched with curiosity.

"Tell me what you know, Bakhai," urged the premer. "You are holding back."

"I am not even supposed to be here," Bakhai replied softly. "I came in a gamble to save your lives, but do not expect me to betray my brothers."

"Then convince me that my cause is lost," prompted the premer. "Maybe you can convince me to surrender."

Bakhai knew he was being toyed with, but he sighed and nodded with the hope that he might succeed.

"You do not have this valley blocked off," declared Bakhai. "We do. Send runners to each of the valley's exits, but tell them to tread softly. I would not want them to die."

Cardijja nodded to Luggar who stepped outside the tent and issued the orders that sent two runners off in different directions. He promptly returned inside the tent.

"The tribes are outside both ends of the valley," continued Bakhai. "When the time is right, they will sweep in and finish you off."

"Finish us off?" frowned Cardijja. "That is a mighty big aspiration."

"It is right now," agreed Bakhai, "but it won't be in the morning. Tonight you will not only be attacked by elven arrows, but the Qubari and their poison darts will return, as will the tyriks."

"Tyriks?" questioned the premer. "Who are the tyriks?"

"Not who, but what," answered Bakhai. "The tyriks are the giant

spiders that you encountered in the jungle."

"You know about that?" gasped Luggar. "How is that possible?"

"I know everything that has happened to your army," answered Bakhai. "None of it happened by chance. Every attack on you was well planned and meticulously executed. Tonight will be no exception."

"Then your visit to our camp was no accident?" asked the premer.

"It was planned," admitted Bakhai. "We had to find out if you knew where Angragar was. I was chosen for the task. I am the brother of the Astor."

"And a valuable bargaining chip," grinned General Luggar.

"Hardly," Bakhai shook his head. "I was forbidden to come here tonight to talk to you. None of the others believe that you are ready to surrender. They feel that you must suffer more before you abandon your lust for death."

"And why do you feel differently?" asked Cardijja.

"I wondered that for days," sighed Bakhai. "I finally realized that you are no different than the Fakarans. You have this sense of duty to obey Vand, but you do not even understand what you are fighting for. If you knew the truth, you would not only abandon this war, but you would join our side and help rebuild Fakara."

"A dreamer," snarled Luggar. "You are too young to understand the ravages of war. We fight because we are destined to rule this wasteland."

"Just as your ancestors fought a thousand years ago," nodded Bakhai. "It is their descendants that you are trying to kill today."

"What do you mean?" asked the premer.

"Vand left this land two thousand years ago," explained Bakhai. "He suffered a terrible defeat after defying God. He vowed to return and destroy everyone. A thousand years later, thousands of Motangans fled from Vand's rule. They came back here and tried to conquer the land. They succeeded to some extent, but today both peoples have joined forces to defend our lands against the evil of Vand. For thousands of years, everyone has suffered as Vand pitted brother against brother. Don't you think it is time for it to stop? Or are you still determined to sacrifice your life and the lives of your men for a single man consumed by hatred?"

"Vand is not an ordinary man," snarled Luggar. "He is a god."

"He was a priest of Kaltara before he was seduced by the demon, Dobuk," corrected Bakhai. "He is no god, and he will be defeated by the Three. It is foretold that the Star, the Astor, and the Torak will stand against Vand. They will defeat him. Don't you want to live to see it?"

Two runners burst through the tent flap. Everyone looked up with anticipation of the report.

“Both ends of the valley are covered with huge spider webs,” reported one of the soldiers. “The men are panicking.”

“Go calm them down, Luggar,” ordered Cardijja. “Restore order to this camp.”

Luggar started to object, but the premer’s face was set with determination. The general left the tent with the two soldiers.

“You have risked your life to come here and warn me,” Cardijja said softly to Bakhai. “You must have known that you would die for your efforts. Why did you come?”

“You are a good man, Cardijja,” replied Bakhai. “You care for your men, and I believe that you must be wary of how Vand is using you. I believe that you will do the right thing for your people. This killing can stop tonight. All it will take is your word. I know what my brother has planned for you. There is no escape for your army. Think about it, but do not take a long time to reach your decision. The attacks can begin at any moment.”

“They will at least wait for the Astor’s brother to return,” mused Cardijja. “That will buy me some time to think about your proposition.”

“No, it won’t,” replied Bakhai. “No one knows that I have come here tonight. As I said before, I was forbidden to come. I came anyway.”

“You can’t expect me to go against everything I have ever believed in,” balked Cardijja. “I am a military man. I have an obligation to fight.”

“You are also a husband and father,” retorted Bakhai. “Or at least you were. Must you leave your wife a widow to satisfy Vand’s ego? Think of your men and their loved ones on the Island of Darkness. Your stubborn decision will destroy all of those lives, and it still will not affect the outcome of this war. Your men are in no condition to fight and the battle begins any moment. Stop it! End the madness now and surrender.”

Premer Cardijja stared at Bakhai as if he were a specter. His brow knitted and his mouth opened in wonder.

“What do you know about my being a father?” he asked.

“I know about Armen,” Bakhai said softly as he suddenly understood why he was so drawn to Cardijja. He shared the pain of a lost father-son relationship. “You talk in your sleep to him every night. I am sorry for you. I understand your pain. My parents died when I was quite young. I miss them both.”

Tears flowed down Bakhai’s cheeks, and he turned aside to avoid being seen by Cardijja. General Luggar entered the tent and halted just inside the flap. He looked at Bakhai crying and then saw the tears running down Cardijja’s cheeks as well. The premer noticed him and

quickly wiped his eyes and straightened as he stood up.

"Wake the camp, General Luggar," ordered the premer. "I want a huge campfire built at the extreme northern edge of the valley. Make it as large as is possible. I want it seen for leagues around."

"For what purpose?" asked the general.

"When it is complete," the premer continued, "I want every one of our men to march by it. They are to drop their weapons in a pile on the ground near the fire."

"We will be defenseless," protested the general. "If the Fakarans attack how are we to defend the camp?"

"We are surrendering, General," declared Premer Cardijja. "It is to our advantage to make that fact obvious to the Fakarans before they attack us. Make that fire big, and get those soldiers up there to leave their weapons."

"But…" frowned the general.

"Move, Luggar," shouted Cardijja. "I do not want to waste another life if we can avoid it. I want my men reunited with their families."

Chapter 37

Army of the Dead

Princess Alahara and the Astor stood on the rim of the Valley of Bones. They stared down at the huge bonfire at the northern edge of the valley and the long line of Motangan soldiers marching by it.

"What are they doing?" asked Princess Alahara.

"They are piling their weapons next to the fire," answered Rejji.

"It is as if they are doing it for show," remarked Wyant. "They want us to see it."

"So that we know that they are unarmed?" asked Princess Alahara. "Do they think that we will not attack just because they have no weapons?"

"That is exactly what they think," nodded Rejji. "If I was not suspicious of the Motangans, I would suspect that they were surrendering."

"That is exactly what they are doing," announced Yltar as he approached the group. "Premer Cardijja has had enough of this war."

"That is incredible," replied Wyant. "I could not imagine so many men surrendering. I think it is a trap."

"Then you do not have enough faith in Kaltara," smiled the Qubari shaman. "One does not set a trap by disarming himself. Our forces could easily slaughter the Motangans without their weapons."

"Why?" asked the Astor. "What would cause them to surrender when they have finally found a place to rest for the night? Do you think they know about the spider webs?"

"They know everything," nodded Yltar. "They know about the poisoned meat, the webs, the elven archers, and the horsemen waiting to invade this tranquil valley. Why else would they consider surrendering such a large force of men?"

"How could they know?" scowled Princess Alahara. "Are you saying that we have a traitor in our midst?"

"Perhaps," shrugged Yltar. "It depends upon your definition of traitor. Surely someone told them about our plans, but does that make him a traitor if the telling brought the Motangan surrender?"

Rejji whirled around, his eyes scanning the rim of the valley. "Where is Bakhai?" he demanded.

"He is in Premer Cardijja's tent," Yltar answered. "He told you of his desire to seek peace with the Motangans, but you refused him. It would appear that he valued peace over his own life."

“And it would appear that he was correct in his beliefs,” nodded Rejji. “How long have you known he was in the camp?”

“I knew that he would go before he left,” replied the shaman.

“And you said nothing?” frowned Rejji.

“I said nothing to you,” replied Yltar, “but I prayed to Kaltara for Bakhai’s safety and success. You would have stopped him from going out of fear for his safety, but Bakhai has become a shaman in his own right. His closeness with Kaltara must be respected. You see him only through a brother’s eyes.”

“He is my brother,” snapped Rejji. “How am I supposed to see him? I cannot believe that he defied me, and that you let him endanger his life.”

“His life in not in danger,” assured Yltar. “While Bakhai may believe that he is alone, he is not. Kaltara drove your brother to the Motangan camp many days ago. You did not ask him to go, yet he acted as if you had. Did you not wonder why he volunteered?”

“Kaltara told him to volunteer,” Princess Alahara smiled, “but why?”

“To build a bond with Premer Cardijja,” smiled Yltar. “At least that is what actually happened. Without that bond, the Motangans would have never surrendered.”

Rejji stared at the shaman for a few moments and then smiled and nodded. “We need to arrange for food for the Motangans. See to it, Wyant. Yltar, accompany me down into the valley. It is time to accept Cardijja’s surrender. Vandegar awaits our armies.”

* * *

A heavy fog rolled across the sea smothering the city of Meliban. One moment the stars hung brightly in the black sky, and the next moment one could not see two paces in front of oneself. Simple sounds distorted and echoed through the city without direction. The ships in the harbor became enshrouded and impossible to see. The fog was so thick that the sentries could not even see each other. The Motangan sentries on the wharf could only hear the lapping of the waves and the distant jostling of the rigging of the invisible ships.

Fog was fairly frequent near the mouth of the Meliban River, and the Motangan guards had grown used to it. This particular fog raised no sense of alarm, nor did it seem unusual, but unusual it was. This particular fog was magical.

The main pier in Meliban was a long wooden finger that stretched far into the harbor. Water constantly lapped at the pilings as the waves rolled into shore. On this particular night, those gentle swells carried a dark shape under the dock. Where the water ended and the sand began, the dark shape exited the water, crawling under the wooden slats until there was no room to crawl further. The shape

lingered for several long moments, ears perked to listen for nearby sounds. After a time, the shape slid out from under the dock and, hunched over, crept onto the wharf. Silent footsteps slowly moved in the fog until one of the sentries was in sight. With eye-blinking swiftness and a surety of purpose, the shape moved up behind the sentry and struck out. A black blade sliced the throat of the sentry while the other hand covered the sentry's mouth. Lowering the body to the ground, HawkShadow moved off to hunt the other sentry.

Within minutes the other sentry was slain, and HawkShadow moved stealthily out onto the long finger of wooden slats. He emitted a sound that resembled the screech of a hawk. A like sound echoed back to him from the harbor. Three successive birdcalls brought a large shape into view, gliding slowly across the water. HawkShadow grabbed a coil of rope attached to the dock and threw it towards the bow of the ship. Someone caught it. The Sakovan assassin moved quickly to grab another coil of rope and toss it to someone on the stern of the ship. Within seconds the ship was tied to the dock and people began disembarking. There was no need for speech or hand signals. Everyone knew his task. HawkShadow stood to one side as the other Sakovans moved silently along the dock and into the city. When StarWind got off the ship, HawkShadow moved alongside her and joined the column of Sakovans. The last to exit the ship were the Sakovan mages led by the Star of Sakova and her uncle, Temiker.

The Sakovan mages walked off the dock and waited patiently on the fog-enshrouded wharf while the Sakovan warriors moved along the streets and into the city. Although fog typically dulled and distorted sounds, an eerie silence pervaded the city. Temiker listened intently as he counted numbers in his head. After an interminable delay, Temiker spoke softly.

"It is time," the old mage announced. "Remember the Star's instructions, and do not unnecessarily endanger yourselves. We can afford the time to stay in Meliban until the task is complete. There is no rush."

A hundred Sakovan mages followed Lyra and Temiker into the fog. As they moved along the main street of the city red-clad bodies appeared on the ground, dead eyes staring into the mist. The mages walked around the corpses or stepped over them. When they approached the center of the city, mages began to peel off to each side of the street. Some moved silently into narrow alleyways, while others sought the safety of dark corners formed by adjacent buildings.

Lyra and Temiker halted in the park that occupied the very center of Meliban. The remaining mages split off in three different directions to hide themselves and await the proper moment. Temiker began counting anew, giving time for all of the mages to find hiding spots.

“If you are ready?” Temiker asked softly as the numbers ran down inside his head.

“I am ready,” nodded Lyra. “Where will you be?”

“At the edge of the park against the building,” answered Temiker. “You will not be able to see me, but neither will the Motangans. Be careful, Lyra, and do not let the power drain from you. If you get into trouble, shout, and I will come to your aid. I will lift the fog as soon as I see your blue cylinder.”

Temiker did not wait for a reply. He walked away from the Star of Sakova and placed his back against one of the buildings bordering the park. He quickly wove an illusion that made it appear as if there was a pile of crates in the spot where he stood. He hoped that no one would desire to climb up on the crates. Moments later a blue cylinder shot skyward from the center of the park. He knew that Lyra had invoked her spell of protection. Without delay, the old mage cast his arms upward. The fog that smothered the city instantly dissipated from the park and the nearest buildings, although the rest of Meliban remained enshrouded. Lyra’s blue column shone brightly and cast an eerie swath of blue light over the surrounding buildings. Shouts immediately came from windows surrounding the park.

The first to arrive were Motangan soldiers from the administration building. Officers shouted commands and horns blew. Soldiers began gathering from all quarters of the city, but not as many responded as should have. All around the perimeter of the city, red-clad bodies littered the ground, and the Sakovan warriors moved inward towards the park, silently killing soldiers as they exited the buildings. Within minutes of the first alarm, black-cloaked mages swarmed towards the park. A group of a hundred black-cloaks gathered around Veritago as the mage leader stared at the young woman inside the blue tube. The mages were but a black dot upon a sea of red as the park filled with Motangans.

“What do you make of it?” one of the mages asked of the leader.

“Undoubtedly magic,” reasoned Veritago, “but I have never seen anything like it. It bothers me that she calls attention to herself. Is she friend or foe?”

It was at that time the Star of Sakova chose to speak. “Motangans,” Lyra said calmly, her voice magically amplified throughout the city, “I am Lyra, the Star of Sakova. I have come to Meliban to demand that you lay down your weapons and disavow this invasion of Fakara. The armies of the Island of Darkness are defeated. Lay down your weapons, and you will be allowed to live. Defy me, and you will die.”

For a long moment the park remained silent. Suddenly one of the mages threw a fireball at Lyra. The fiery projectile sailed into the blue

cylinder and disappeared.

"Kill her!" shouted Veritago. "Charge!"

The Motangan soldiers did not hesitate. With swords drawn, a ring of soldiers raced forth to be the first to pierce the body of the Star of Sakova. Lyra closed her eyes as the murderous mob surrounded her. Screams filled the air as hundreds of soldiers struck the blue shield. Arms disintegrated and legs disappeared, but the mob continued inward, pushed onward by those behind. Whole bodies disappeared into the blue cylinder, and tears welled up in Lyra's eyes.

It took several minutes for Veritago to realize that something was wrong. Screams ripped through the air and died much too suddenly to be natural. He shouted for the soldiers to stop, but it was hard to be heard over the screaming. Another several minutes passed before the soldiers managed to back away from Lyra. The wounded surrounded the Star, rolling on the ground and screaming in agony. Veritago marched forward, the soldiers parting to let the black-cloak through. The other mages followed cautiously. Veritago surveyed the carnage and then his eyes landed on the Star of Sakova. He stared at her in disgust as he saw her crying.

"Your shield cannot protect you forever," sneered Veritago as he looked for magical defects in the column. "Drop your protection, and I will promise you a swift death."

Lyra wiped her eyes and glared and the mage. She spoke calmly once again, but her words were not directed at the mage. Instead she spoke to the soldiers who stared at her uncomprehendingly. By this time, thousands of Motangan soldiers had crowded into the park, and there was barely room to move.

"Do not let these black-cloaks destroy your lives," Lyra said. "Lay down your weapons and leave the city. You will not be harmed. I implore you not to fight me."

Veritago snarled and backed away from Lyra. "Ready arrows," he shouted to the soldiers before turning to the mages. "We will weaken her spell of protection. Let the arrows weaken the tube and then strike with everything you have."

The black-cloaks nodded enthusiastically as the Motangan soldiers began shooting thousands of arrows at Lyra. The arrows disappeared as they struck the blue shield, but the archers kept up a constant stream of arrows.

"There will be no surrender," Lyra said, sorrow evident in her voice.

The Motangans had no reaction to the words of the Star of Sakova. They continued to fire at her as the black-cloaks focused their attention on the blue shield to watch for any sign of its weakening. The Sakovans however did react to her words. The Sakovan mages

crept out of their hiding places and took up positions surrounding the park. Suddenly a hundred light blades whirled into the thick mob of Motangans, and bodies were sliced into pieces.

Temiker watched as wave after wave of light blades sliced through the crowd. He shook his head sadly, but he kept his eyes on the group of black-cloaked mages. It took several minutes for the attack to register with the black-cloaks, so intent were they on destroying the blue shield. When they finally did notice, it was because the light blades were ripping through their ranks. Veritago turned and tried to marshal his mages to defend against the Sakovans. Temiker did not give him a chance. From the concealment of his illusion, Temiker cast a light blade of his own. The bright projectile spun into the group of mages. Other Sakovan mages had also seen the attempt to use magic against them and had also targeted the knot of black cloaks. Veritago and his minions ceased to exist.

"Stop!" shouted Lyra as she saw the black-cloaks die. "I will give one more chance for the Motangans to surrender."

The light blades from the Sakovan mages halted, as did the arrows aimed at the Star of Sakova. There was a tense moment of standoff as the Motangan archers thought about attacking the Sakovan mages. Lyra spoke quickly.

"Drop your weapons," she instructed. "There is no need for you to die. The black-cloaks no longer rule over you. Drop your weapons and live to see your families again."

Many of the Motangans lowered their bows and placed their arrows back in their quivers, but others did not. One of those who hesitated spoke loudly.

"Why should we believe you?" he shouted. "If we drop our weapons, you can just kill us easier."

"Your deaths are not particularly hard to accomplish," replied Lyra. "Look around you. The carnage sickens me. We arrived in Meliban on a great ship. I am prepared to let all of you board that ship, and the others already in the harbor, and return to the Island of Darkness. Once there, the elves and humans who now rule the island will meet you. They will return you to your families, and the war for you will be over."

"And if Vand returns we will die," shouted the skeptical soldier.

"Perhaps," admitted Lyra, "but you will surely die here tonight if you do not surrender. As for Vand returning to the Island of Darkness, I doubt that he wants to. He has come here to conquer Angragar, but we will not allow that. Let me tell you the state of the Motangan army. The Island of Darkness has been conquered by the elves. Premer Doralin surrendered to me in the Sakova along with eighty thousand men. Perhaps you have already received this news."

Many of the soldiers murmured and nodded.

"Premer Shamal and his army were destroyed in Khadora," Lyra continued. "They refused to surrender, and there were no prisoners taken. Earlier this evening, Premer Cardijja and one hundred thousand of his men surrendered to the Astor in the mountains far to the east of here. Other than those of you here in Meliban, Vand's personal army headed by Premer Tzargo is all that remains of your once mighty army, and we have no desire to allow him to escape. The Island of Darkness shall remain free of Vand's influence. It can be your home once again, and you can live in peace. Will you lay down your weapons and surrender?"

Many of the soldiers looked to the protester for guidance, but others threw down their bows and swords. The move was contagious. Suddenly the air filled with the sound of discarded weapons. Even the protester nodded his head in defeat. He dropped his bow and sword.

The Sakovan mages faded back into the fog and found their hiding places. The Sakovan warriors, who had moved up behind the Sakovan mages, turned and headed for the wharf. They hurriedly unloaded the five hundred chokas and led them on a circuitous path towards the gates of the city, while StarWind and HawkShadow walked into the park.

"We will escort you to the harbor," announced StarWind. "Each of the ships will be piloted by Sakovans, and mages will be aboard to ensure that you arrive safely in Vandamar. If you would form a line and follow us, we will get you underway quickly."

Other Sakovan warriors lined the main street of the city to ensure that no weapons were being taken aboard the ships. Temiker dropped his illusion and banished the fog that persisted over much of the city. The Motangans marched quietly to the harbor and began filing onto the ship that the Sakovans had arrived on. When it was filled to capacity, it set sail for the Island of Darkness, and another ship was brought from the harbor to the dock.

The loading continued through the night and into the morning as seven thousand Motangan soldiers were shipped off to Vandamar. A few minor fights broke out during the process, but considering the magnitude of the evacuation, things went very smoothly.

"You should get some rest," Temiker said to Lyra as they sat over a meal in the Kheri Inn. "It will be a long ride to Vandegar."

"We all need rest before the trip," nodded Lyra. "Have all of the buildings in the city been searched?"

"They are still searching," answered Temiker, "but I feel confident that all of the Motangans are gone. You did well last night, Lyra. I am proud of you."

"We killed close to three thousand men last night," frowned Lyra.

“That is hardly worth being proud of.”

“You concentrate on the deaths,” frowned Temiker, “when you need to focus on the lives that you saved. Did your cylinder weaken at all?”

“No,” Lyra shook her head. “At least not that I could feel. I felt smothered when all of those men charged at me. It was horrible listening to them die. I don’t want to do that again.”

“Hopefully, you won’t have to,” Temiker smiled weakly. “Only Vandegar remains to be defeated.”

* * *

Emperor Vand bowed to Dobuk and backed out of the great chamber filled with lava-spewing volcanoes. His smile was broad as he marched through the corridors of the Temple of Vandegar and out onto the roof. The six demons occupied the roof and they nodded respectfully as the emperor emerged. Vand halted and gazed at the black, stone creatures. They were beasts of legend and Vand swelled with pride to have been given charge over them.

Agad, Barrok, and Caliphia, the demons of the falling. Xero, Yunga, and Zarapeto, the demons of the resurrection. All were gifts from Dobuk, the Great Demon, and they were sworn to serve Vand. Beings mightier than the greatest armies, Vand gazed upon them and grinned with delight.

Also waiting on the roof of the temple was Premer Tzargo. All of Tzargo’s fifty thousand men had recently undergone the ceremony that transformed them into hellsouls. Their lives were now inseparably intertwined with Vand’s. The soldiers might die in battle, but they would rise again and continue to fight. Only the severing of their heads or the touch of a weapon blessed by Kaltara could permanently kill the hellsouls.

The twelve personal mages of Vand were also present. While those mages carried no particular blessing from Dobuk, they were twelve of the most powerful mages in the world. Vand himself had personally selected each of them for their power and skill.

“Do you think we are ready to meet the enemy, Premer Tzargo?” asked the emperor.

“As ready as we will ever be,” Tzargo nodded. “I would still like to call Premer Cardijja’s men here to supplement our troops. We can never have enough.”

“You are a greedy man,” snarled Vand as he fixed his gaze on the premer.

Premer Tzargo swallowed hard, but the emperor’s lips turned upwards in a wicked grin.

“I like greedy men,” chuckled Vand. “Cardijja must continue to hunt for Angragar, but I can still put your mind at ease. Come with

me."

Vand led Premer Tzargo to the northern edge of the roof. He waved his hand over the plain below and the great finger of water that swung down from the ocean.

"Do you see where that great body of water intrudes upon the plain?" asked Vand. "Do you know its story?"

"I see the water," replied the premer as he gazed outward from the roof of the high temple, "but I know of no story connected with it."

"Then I shall tell you the story," Vand continued unfazed. "Thousands of years ago I stood in this very spot, battling the other gods. Millions of people worshipped me, and that made the other gods jealous. They conspired against me and joined forces to defeat me. I managed to kill them all except for one."

"Kaltara?" asked Tzargo.

"Yes, Kaltara," Vand hissed. "Never mention his name again in my presence."

Premer Tzargo bowed meekly, and the emperor nodded in satisfaction of the premer's submission.

"I could have defeated them all," Vand continued, "but they tired me out. They were too cowardly to attack me singly, because they feared my power." Vand pointed once again to the water, "That body of water that you see did not exist at the time. It used to be part of the Plains of Vandegar, and millions of my followers dwelt there. The great city of Vandegar rested upon that plain, and it was more magnificent than Angragar."

"What happened?" asked Tzargo.

"The other gods joined their powers against me," explained Vand. "They smote the city of Vandegar and the land that it sat upon. The land twisted and was swallowed up. The sea rushed in and killed the millions of inhabitants. I promised that I would return for them one day, and I have arrived. Behold."

Vand stretched out his arms, and unintelligible words rolled off his lips. The mages and the demons gathered around, their lips curled with delight as they anticipated what was to come. Suddenly steam rose from the long finger of water, and great waves crashed about in a chaotic pattern.

Premer Tzargo's jaw dropped as something poked up from the roiling sea. He tried to focus on it to identify it, but the sea was violent, and waves rose high enough to block the object from view. Vand continued chanting and other objects rose from the sea. Within minutes it was clear that a city was rising from the depths of the sea. Land rose with the city, and the water fled back to the northern sea, carrying buildings and debris with it. Eventually the entire plain was

reclaimed, and the ruins of a once great city stood dripping in the sunlight.

“Vandegar?” gasped Tzargo.

“Vandegar,” nodded Vand. “The years have not been kind to it. Kaltara shall pay for this.”

Vand continued chanting, and his arms moved fluidly in a flowing pattern over the city. Tzargo squinted as he caught sight of something moving. No, not something, but many things were moving in the newly reclaimed city. Xero chuckled loudly and nudged Zarapeto.

As Tzargo watched with disbelief, thousands upon thousands of skeletons clawed their way out of the dirt and began marching towards the temple. Within moments the resurrected plain was swarming with skeletons and all of them were heading for the temple.

“There are your extra men, Tzargo,” grinned Vand. “I said that I would increase your army tenfold. Behold. Five hundred thousand warriors who will not eat a shred of your precious provisions.”

Chapter 38

Of Dragons and Demons

The dragon banked slightly, and Emperor Marak stirred from his slumber. The battle at the Khadora River and the long march towards Fakara had left little time for sleep. Exhaustion was beginning to take its toll on the Torak, and he napped whenever he got the chance. Marak's eyes opened and his head swiveled from side to side. While he could sense the first lightening of the day, the sky was not visible. Moist, gray swirls raced by as Myka glided silently eastward.

"It was time for you to awaken anyway," the dragon apologized softly.

"Where are we?" asked the Torak.

"We are crossing the Fortung Mountains," answered the winged warrior. "The summits are just ahead."

"Any sign of our armies?" asked Marak.

"The Khadorans were easy to spot before we entered the clouds," replied Myka. "Their columns stretch for many leagues. The elves and Chula were harder to find, but even they could not hide from my eyes. They have already reached the southern pass."

"They must have marched day and night to get here ahead of the Khadorans," frowned the Emperor. "Take me to them. We all need to rest before the coming battle."

Myka nodded silently and banked hard to the right. Emperor Marak involuntarily flinched when a wall of solid rock suddenly appeared in front of them. The dragon snorted and banked more severely. Marak exhaled slowly as the face of the mountain sped by mere inches away. Moments later the dragon descended out of the clouds, and the warm glow of dawn surrounded them.

Marak knew that the close call with the mountain was intentional on the dragon's part, but he felt that something was missing from the experience, although he could not put his finger on it. His eyes scanned the towering peaks while his mind probed his feelings of ill ease.

Minutes later, Myka thrust her wings straight and began circling over the southern pass. Marak looked down and saw the armies of the elves and the Chula. Warriors pointed skyward at the winged warrior, and excitement rippled through the armies as the warriors broke ranks and cleared a place for the dragon to land. The Torak gazed at Myka with a puzzling frown as the dragon broke out of her circling and

glided towards the pass. His mouth opened to speak, but he halted before the words were formed.

As Myka landed in the pass, the elves and Chula bowed reverently to the winged warrior and the Torak. Emperor Marak slid off the dragon's back as soon as they had landed. Marak's father, Ukaro, strode towards the new arrivals with a grin on his face. He embraced the Torak with a smile and gently placed his hand on Myka's scales.

"So," Ukaro said humorously to the dragon, "you did not try to sneak up on us this time. You must be getting old."

Myka did not respond, and the puzzled frown returned to the Torak's face, but he did not have time to dwell upon the mystery. The leaders of the elves and the Chula quickly gathered around the Torak to hear about the reason for the visit.

"Will you be joining us for the coming battle?" asked King Avalar.

"Marak is a Chula," declared Tmundo, chief of the Kywara tribe. "It is fitting that he join our ranks for the final battle."

"Why have you come?" asked Princess Alastasia.

Marak gazed around at the gathering tribes and smiled broadly. It was the type of welcome he had come to expect, but it suddenly dawned on him that the extent of the warmth coming from these two diverse peoples was nothing short of love and admiration. It was not so much the thought that they were paying homage to the Torak, as they were embracing a true friend and family member.

"The elves and the Chula travel swiftly," grinned Marak. "It would not do for you to beat the cavalries of Khadora to the battlefield. I have come to join you for the night while you rest your armies."

"Then let us make camp here in the pass," grinned Rykoma, the head shaman of the Kywara tribe.

Tmundo also grinned as he shouted out orders to make camp for the night. His boast of having to sit around and wait on the Khadorans was met with jubilation. Marak smiled broadly as he knew that the elves and Chula had marched long and hard to ensure that they did not miss the battle. He noticed the sighs of relief as the tribesmen began setting up campfires.

"You know that we would not start the attack without your armies," Marak said softly as the elven king and princess joined the Chula shaman and chiefs in a wide circle around the first fire built.

"We understand that," Ukaro nodded seriously, "but the first action may not be left up to us. It would be wise of Vand to attack us one group at a time if that were possible."

"What of the eastern armies?" asked Princess Alastasia. "Will Rejji and Alahara be joining us?"

"They are coming," the Torak nodded at the elven princess and

then turned towards his father. “Premer Cardijja surrendered at the Valley of Bones. Your concern is valid, Ukaro. We must make sure that all of our armies are in position before the attack commences. Vand is only supposed to have fifty thousand men in his army, but I will not accept that as truth until after he is defeated. Vand has shown the capability of surprising us before. I do not intend to let him do that again.”

“What is the plan of attack?” asked King Avalar.

“I truly have not given it much thought,” admitted Emperor Marak. “That is one of the reasons for stopping your armies. We have been so intent on reaching Vandegar that we have not given sufficient thought to what might await us there.”

“We could send scouts on ahead,” suggested Tmundo. “A Chula shaman can travel swiftly without tiring.”

“Tonight we all rest,” Marak shook his head. “Let us take some time to discuss what we do know about Vand. In the morning it might make sense to send scouts out ahead of us.”

Everyone agreed and soon food was served. The conversation was light during the meal and many stories about the battle of the Khadora River were shared. After the meal the group began talking about Vandegar and Vand. Marak offered up the tales of old that he had read about in Angragar, but a feeling of unease hampered his concentration. He could not locate the source of his feelings, but he knew that something was wrong.

The talk continued for several hours before the group began to split up to go to sleep. After most of the leaders had left, Marak’s mother came over and sat down quietly beside him.

“What is bothering you?” Glenda asked. “While your lips move freely, your mind is not present.”

“I am not sure,” sighed Marak. “It is just a feeling that something is wrong. There is something that I have overlooked and I think it may affect us greatly.”

“When did this feeling begin?” prompted Glenda.

“On the way here,” shrugged Marak. “I cannot say for sure when I first noticed it, but I felt fine yesterday. What does it matter when it started?”

“Think, Marak,” urged Glenda. “If you can remember precisely when the omen began, you can locate its source.”

Marak frowned as he mentally traced his steps backwards in time. Finally he sighed and slumped. “I cannot tell when it first came over me,” he said. “I think I just need to force it out of my mind. I am probably tired.”

“Have you not slept at all?” asked Glenda.

“I napped on Myka’s back for a while,” admitted the Torak, “but

there has been too much to do to actually spend a night sleeping. While the Lords' Council was almost eager to follow me across the Fortung Mountains, many of the smaller clans required convincing. I could not afford to lose half of my army."

"Could it have been a dream while you napped on Myka?" asked Glenda.

Marak pondered the question for a few moments before his eyes suddenly widened. He stood quickly and Glenda rose with him. She gently placed her hand on his arm and peered into his eyes.

"You have remembered?" she asked.

"It is a small thing," Marak nodded, "but I must ask about it. I am sure that is why I am feeling this way."

"Tell me about it," urged Glenda.

"It is Myka," replied the Torak. "The dragon and I have grown very close. I feel that I have begun to anticipate her moves very well, but she acted strangely today."

"In what way?" questioned the Torak's mother.

"Her flying skills are legendary," explained Emperor Marak. "We almost crashed into a mountain on the way here, but I was not afraid. I know Myka well enough to understand that we were never really in danger. She flies like that for the thrill of it, but she also makes light of it when she does it. Today there was no cackle of joy."

"And that causes you grief?" frowned Glenda. "I do not understand."

"I don't either," admitted Marak, "but it is not normal for her. She also did not try to sneak up on the Chula and the elves when we arrived. She always delights in surprising people. Ukaro even taunted her about it, and she did not answer him with a quip or rebuttal. Something is wrong with her. I must go to her immediately."

Glenda's face showed her lack of belief, but she smiled and nodded as she removed her hand from Marak's arm. "Go to your dragon," she smiled, "but above all else, you need rest. Do not spend the night talking."

Marak nodded distractedly and hurried out of the circle of light to where the dragon was sleeping. He made no attempt to be quiet as he walked up and stood before the dragon's snout. Myka's eyes were closed, but the Torak knew that she was aware of his closeness. He sat down before the dragon and waited for the quip that was to come. Nothing happened and Marak's brow creased heavily.

"Aren't you even going to threaten to roast me?" Marak asked softly.

One of Myka's eyes opened and peered at the Emperor of Khadora. The eye closed again and the dragon remained silent.

"What is bothering you?" asked Marak. "I would think that you

would share it with me."

The eye opened and closed again.

"Don't you ever sleep?" the dragon scowled. "Go away and rest. A great battle is soon upon us. You will need your strength."

"Would you rest if something was troubling me?" the Torak persisted.

"Yes," snapped the dragon. "Something is troubling you now, and I am trying to rest. Go away."

"That is somewhat better," grinned the Torak, "but I will not leave until you trust me enough to share your concerns."

For several long minutes the scene remained frozen. Marak sat before the dragon's snout and Myka's eyes remained closed. Without warning, Myka's eyes snapped open and flames belched from her mouth, narrowly missing the Emperor. Marak felt the heat sear his arm, but his lips smiled broadly.

"You missed," teased the Torak, "and I am right in front of you. You must be getting old and feeble. How will you deal with Vand's army with such poor skills?"

Myka growled loudly, causing many in the vicinity to jump to their feet. Marak waved to them and indicated that they should go back to sleep. He watched Myka intently and finally the dragon sighed heavily.

"You make light of this coming battle," Myka said softly, "but you are unaware of what awaits us at Vandegar."

For the first in their relationship, Marak sensed fear in the dragon's voice.

"Tell me about it," Marak pleaded softly. "There is nothing that we cannot face together."

"There are things that I must face alone," declared Myka.

"Alone?" balked Marak. "Never. You have always stood by me, and I shall always stand by you. Together, we will face whatever it is that troubles you."

"Not this time, Torak," countered the dragon. "You would only get in the way."

"I am pretty good at getting in the way of Vand's armies," assured the Torak. "You forget that I have skills other than wielding a sword. If I can't slice into whatever it is you must face, I will use magic to destroy them."

"Dobuk's demons are immune to your magic," scowled Myka. "They will toss you aside to get to me. You must be nowhere near me when they attack."

"Demons?" gasped Marak. "What kind of creatures are they?"

"They are the spawn of Dobuk," replied the dragon. "They are creatures of great strength and are almost indestructible. They will

slice through your armies with ease if I do not distract them."

"I will concentrate our archers on them," swore the Torak. "If magic will not fell them, I will make them succumb to shafts of steel."

"Their skin is like stone," Myka shook her head. "Your arrows will merely bounce off them. Only I can kill them."

"How can you kill them then?" asked Marak. "They cannot be indestructible if you can kill them. You can kill them, can't you?"

"I can," nodded the dragon. "It is the purpose for my kind being created."

"I don't understand," frowned the Torak. "Have you battled demons before?"

"Twice," Myka answered softly. "The first war between Kaltara and Dobuk was never recorded. It was in the time before man. Hundreds of dragons and demons battled for the glory of their masters. Most died before Dobuk withdrew from the battlefield. It is said that the tears of the dragons flooded the world as they grieved for their lost kin."

"I imagine the demons must have suffered even worse," Marak said cautiously. "They must have added to the flood."

"Demons do not grieve for their kin, or anyone else," snapped Myka. "They are despicable beings that were born to kill without remorse. Do not attempt to draw parallels between the winged warriors and the foul spawn of Dobuk."

"I am sorry," apologized the Torak. "You said that you fought the demons twice. When was the second time?"

"The second battle was at Vandegar," the dragon answered as she tried to compose herself. "There were only a few dozen dragons and demons left when Vand tried to crush the forces of Kaltara. The battle was fierce and both races almost became extinct. Now has come the time to finish it once and for all. When this battle is over, either the demons or dragons will cease to exist. It will be as if we never existed."

"Do not concede the battle before it is joined," Marak stated in an attempt to raise the spirits of the dragon. "I did not even know that other dragons still existed. How many demons are left?"

"There are six demons left," answered Myka. "They wait for us at Vandegar."

"And how many other dragons?" asked Marak. "When will they arrive?"

"I am the last dragon," Myka replied as giant tears rolled from her eyes.

"Six to one?" gasped Marak. "Can you take on six demons at once?"

"No," answered the dragon. "To fight a single demon is the fight

of your life. In the olden days, the dragons would use clever strategies to outsmart the demons. Kaltara was wise enough to endow us with great intelligence, but Dobuk was merely interested in strength. The demons cannot match wits with a dragon, but their stupidity can only help a small bit."

"How can you use their stupidity against them?" asked Marak.

"By challenging them to mortal combat singly," answered Myka. "Their pride will force them to come one at a time unless Vand discovers what I am trying to do. If he orders them to attack in force, they will."

"You will still have to kill all six of them to win," frowned Marak. "If you are evenly matched in skills and strength, the odds are against you."

Marak had merely been thinking out loud, but he realized his mistake immediately.

"But I am sure that you can do it," Marak quickly added with a smile.

"Nice recovery, Torak," sighed Myka, "but your words are true. My goal in the coming battle is to at least disable each demon before they get me so that they cannot hinder your troops. You must defeat Vand or all hope for the world is lost."

"That is a defeatist attitude," scowled the Torak. "Never give in while there is life in your breast."

"I am not giving in," snapped Myka. "I will do the best that I can do, but I am also keenly aware of my mortality. Why are we even having this discussion? The demons are no affair of yours unless I die before my job is done. Your task is to defeat the armies of Vand and end his miserable life. I will keep the demons busy while you do so. Just don't dally once the battle is joined. Time will not be on our side once the fighting begins."

"There must be a way that I can help you with the demons," sighed Marak. "I will find a way."

"Go to sleep," replied the dragon. "We all need rest so that we are at the peak of our skills when the battle begins. Let me sleep."

Myka's eyes shut instantly. Marak sat for a few more minutes staring at Myka. His mind raced trying to think of how he could help, but he knew that Myka was probably correct. Her life was created to battle the demons, so she surely knew their weaknesses. He finally started to rise to find a place to sleep, but he could not bear to leave Myka alone. The Torak moved close to the dragon and curled up next to her and fell asleep.

* * *

Premer Tzargo entered the throne room at Vandegar. The head mage, Pakar, had just finished addressing the Emperor and returned to

stand with his mages.

"Report, Tzargo," commanded Vand.

"The Khadoran armies are crossing the Fortung Mountains," Tzargo responded. "They appear to be in no particular hurry, but there can be no doubt that every clan in Khadora is coming to Vandegar."

"Excellent," smiled the Emperor. "We will put an end to them soon enough. What about the Chula?"

"There has been no sign of the Chula," frowned Tzargo. "They are definitely not traveling with the Khadorans. I specifically asked our scouts to watch for them."

"And the elves?" prompted the Emperor.

"They have not been seen, either," shrugged Tzargo.

The Emperor growled, but Pakar stepped forward and spoke.

"The Elves and the Chula will travel clandestinely," the mage advised the Emperor. "They may elude our scouts in the forests of Khadora, but once they reach the plains of Fakara, there will be little for them to hide in. We will see them coming long before they get here."

"It has been a long time since you were last in Fakara," the Emperor shook his head. "It is no longer the complete wasteland it once was. The Chula shamans brought their magic here and have caused the barren wastelands to spring to life. You really need to get out more, Pakar."

The mage frowned in humiliation. The Fakara he knew from years ago when he had helped Veltar seize control of Grulak's mind was a vast wasteland. He could not imagine anything else.

"Perhaps you should spend some time on the roof," smiled Premer Tzargo. "While the area around us is indeed barren, you can see the distant forests from up there."

"I have a better idea," smiled the Emperor. "Pakar, take your mages and make your way to the west. You can report back when you have found out where the Chula and elves are."

"And leave you defenseless?" balked the mage. "We might not get back in time for the battle."

"I am hardly defenseless," chuckled the Emperor as he enjoyed watching the mage squirm. "It will give your men something to do while we wait for the Khadorans. They are growing fat and lazy sitting around here. Find the elves and Chula and report back quickly. Go."

Pakar bit his lip as he bowed low to the Emperor. He turned and gathered his dozen mages and marched them out of the room.

"They would be useful to have around when the battle starts," Tzargo said softly.

"They will be back in time," shrugged Vand. "You would be

amazed at how well Pakar and his men can perform when they are given a task. They have not failed me yet, but they are getting lazy sitting around here. Their small task will do them good. Has there been any further word from Premer Cardijja?"

"Nothing," frowned Premer Tzargo. "Their last message made little sense. They were in a jungle being attacked by giant spiders and little men. All attempts to contact them since have failed."

"That is not what I wanted to hear," frowned the Emperor. "I want Angragar located."

"I could send a rider out to them," suggested Tzargo. "There is still time to have his armies return for the coming battle."

"Have I not given you enough men?" shouted Vand. "You have half a million more men than you brought with you, plus I have made each of your men invincible. You have the strength of all of the armies that we sent out of Motanga and still you whine for more. You will not mention it again. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly," Premer Tzargo replied quickly as he bowed low to the Emperor.

Tzargo remained bowed low as he waited for the Emperor's anger to subside. Several minutes passed before the Emperor spoke again.

"What about the dragon?" Vand asked the Premer. "Have there been any sightings of the foul beast?"

Premer Tzargo glanced towards the dark corner of the room as a loud hissing emanated from it when the word dragon was mentioned. He tore his eyes from the dark corner and gazed at the Emperor.

"There has been no mention of a dragon since the battles in Khadora," answered the Premer.

"Zarapeto," called the Emperor. "Come out of the darkness and stand before me."

Premer Tzargo gulped air as the huge demon strode out of the corner. The premer backed slowly away as the black creature made its way to stand before the Emperor. The loud clicking upon the stone floor reverberated through the nearly empty chamber as the demon halted in front of the throne.

"Your command?" asked the demon with a low guttural voice.

"I want you to head to the east," Vand ordered the demon. "I want you to find either Angragar or Premer Cardijja and then report back to me."

"As you command," nodded the demon.

"You will take Xero and Yunga with you," declared the Emperor.

"Three demons are not necessary for so simple a task," frowned the demon.

"I will take no chances while the dragon's location is unknown," Vand responded. "I know you are concerned with missing the battle,

but you need not be. It will take at least a couple of days for the Khadorans to get here. If you have not found Angragar or Cardijja within two days, return here."

Zarapeto nodded and skulked off without a reply.

"Why is the dragon so important to the demons?" asked Premer Tzargo. "Zarapeto appeared offended that you are sending others with him."

"He is greatly offended," shrugged the Emperor with disregard for Zarapeto's feelings. "A dragon is the only beast that can kill a demon, and I will not risk losing Zarapeto because of his foolish pride. A dragon can possibly beat a lone demon, but it has no chance against more than one. My demons will remain grouped in threes until the dragon is destroyed."

"Nothing else can destroy a demon?" asked Tzargo.

"Nothing," smiled Vand. "Perhaps now you can understand my distaste for your whining. Let the Torak bring whatever armies he wants against me. The more he brings; the more we will kill. In just a few days, the world will be delivered to me as promised by Dobuk so long ago."

Chapter 39

They Came from the East

The two mages stood on the open plain, a wasteland blasted to infertility ages ago. It was this area, north of Lake Jabul, that the Chula shamans had not gotten to when they set out to restore life to Fakara's barrenness. While the rest of Fakara was in various stages of regrowth, the land around the Temple of Vandegar still resembled the harshness of salted earth. Having abandoned their horses at the edge of the new forest a day ago, the mages had walked across the barren openness, but they had not been seen by anyone. The shimmering hue of an illusion surrounded the duo, obscuring their approach from the eyes of the enemy. They halted, just a half-hour's stroll from the ancient temple fortress.

"What do you see?" Lady Mystic asked impatiently.

Xavo did not answer as he stood peering at the distant temple. His head shook dismissively as his attention remained intent on the throng of distant Motangans.

"This illusion does nothing to shield us from the sun," warned Vand's daughter. "It is already climbing into the sky, and I am not about to stand out here and bake while you ignore me. What are you looking at?"

Xavo sighed and dropped his hands to his side.

"It was not what I was watching," he explained softly, "it was what I was listening to. We are too far away to see much of anything other than thousands of Motangans milling about."

"Fine," snapped Lady Mystic. "What were you listening to?"

"Pakar is leaving the temple," smiled Xavo. "He is taking his mages with him. I suspect that Vand is sending them somewhere, and they are not too happy with the order."

"All of the mages?" brightened Lady Mystic.

"Yes," smiled Xavo. "Our greatest worry about approaching the temple is no worry at all. With Vand's mages away from Vandegar, we can easily slip into the temple unseen."

"Praise Kaltara," exclaimed Vand's daughter.

Xavo turned and stared at his partner in disbelief.

"What did you say?" he asked. "I thought you did not believe in god?"

Lady Mystic blushed profusely and shrugged.

"Times change," Lady Mystic offered meekly. "Think about it for

a moment. Although we have both tried to deny His existence, we readily accept that Dobuk is guiding Vand's every step. How can we possibly believe in the Great Demon without acknowledging that his counterpart must also exist? Face it, Xavo, we were wrong. Kaltara not only exists, but He is driving us towards our destiny."

"I thought we were walking," Xavo grumbled sarcastically.

"Say what you will, Master Magician," smiled Lady Mystic, "but I know your thoughts well enough. You have already accepted the truth, but you are too stubborn to admit it. As the father of the Star of Sakova, you should have been among the first to understand what is going on in this world."

"I should have been among the first," Xavo sighed in defeat, "but I was not. I still cannot forgive myself for the troubles I caused Lyra. It all seems so long ago."

"Much has transpired since then," consoled Lady Mystic. "You are no longer Aakuta, and Malafar is a distant memory. You have changed, and I mean more than just your appearance. Lyra would be proud of you now."

"My daughter would not even recognize me," chuckled Xavo.

"There is that, too," Lady Mystic frowned. "You do realize that we will be in Vandegar when the armies of the Torak attack? It is very likely that the friends of your daughter will kill us when they arrive. No one knows that we are heading here."

"Does it matter if we are slain by my daughter or by your father?" shrugged Xavo. "No one lives forever. Let's get out of this sun and find a place to hide in the temple while we think of a plan to defeat Dobuk."

Lady Mystic smiled and reached for her lover's hand. They had not walked but a few steps before Lady Mystic stiffened and clamped Xavo's hand in fear. Xavo turned to look at his partner and saw her staring upward. His own eyes rose and scanned the sky. His mouth hung open as he watched the huge black shape flap its wings. Two other black shapes launched themselves from the roof of the temple and sped after the first.

"Demons," Lady Mystic hissed under her breath. "Do not move. Our illusion is not strong enough to withstand their scrutiny."

Xavo continued to stare skyward as the huge beasts flapped their wings in long, slow, powerful beats. The two trailing demons raced to get ahead of the first as all three soared higher into the sky. The first demon snarled at his pursuers as if daring them to question his supremacy. In moments they were too high up to distinguish, and Xavo felt Lady Mystic's grip relax.

"They are so full of themselves," Lady Mystic sighed in relief. "If any one of them had been paying attention, we would no longer

exist."

"We could have given them a fight," Xavo shrugged boastfully.

"No, Xavo," Lady Mystic corrected seriously. "Our magic is useless against them."

"Useless?" balked Xavo. "They are physical creatures. Nothing is indestructible. It would just be a matter of finding their weakness."

"Legend says that they are immune to magic," retorted Lady Mystic.

"Legends have been wrong before," countered Xavo.

"Perhaps," Vand's daughter conceded, "but you would only have seconds to prove it wrong. Your first spell would be your last before their talons ripped you to shreds. What spell would you attempt?"

Xavo stood in contemplation for a moment before sighing. "Let's get out of the sun," he said dryly.

The couple continued walking across the parched land towards the temple. They did not hurry, nor did they dally. As they got closer to the building, they were forced to thread their way through groups of Motangan soldiers that had set up camp outside the temple. Directly around the temple were the thickest crowds of soldiers. Xavo stepped in front of Lady Mystic and, while still holding her hand, led the way single file through the throng of Motangans.

When they reached the front of the temple, they marched up the stairs and found the doors closed. Xavo led Lady Mystic to one side and halted. He did not dare to open the door to gain entrance to the temple. To do so would expose their existence. Patiently, the two mages waited for the door to open. The wait seemed interminable as they listened to the banter of the nearby soldiers.

"I heard that the Khadorans are only two days away," remarked a hawk-nosed soldier.

"Have you heard their numbers?" asked his bald companion.

"No," admitted the first soldier, "but numbers hardly matter in this battle. The dead warriors will take the brunt of any attack. We will be lucky if any Khadorans even reach the temple."

"The rest of our armies did not fair well against these Khadorans and their friends," retorted the bald man. "Don't be so sure that the dead will slow them down."

"Half a million invincible warriors?" chuckled the first soldier. "Don't be ridiculous. I have heard that they cannot die."

"They are already dead," countered the bald man. "I do not like this magic stuff. How can they be invincible if they have already died once?"

"Well," pondered the first soldier, "it is said that we cannot die any more, either. So what are you worried about?"

"I do not believe everything that I am told," snapped the bald

man. “If you think that we will rise from the dead to continue fighting, then you go ahead and believe that. I intend to stay alive.”

The door opened as a group of soldiers filed out. Xavo moved quickly to snare the door before it could close. He swiftly led Lady Mystic through the doors into the temple. The two mages paused inside the doors to let their eyes adjust to the dimness. As soon as his vision was clear, Xavo led Lady Mystic to the stairway and up the stairs.

Lady Mystic marveled at the similarities of the Vandegar Temple to the one she had grown up in on the Island of Darkness. She had heard that the Motangan temple was modeled after an ancient one, but she was filled with awe to actually be in the original temple. She was vaguely aware of being led by Xavo as if he knew exactly where he was going, but her mind was distant as she tried to visualize what life must have been like in the ancient temple in the days of its glory.

Unexpectedly, Xavo stopped at a blank spot on the wall of a corridor. He waved his hand slightly while mumbling under his breath, and a door appeared in the wall. The mage opened the door and ushered Lady Mystic inside. He closed the door and cast a spell over it. Lady Mystic shook her head in confusion and cast an illumination spell so that she could see in the dark windowless wall. She involuntarily inhaled deeply when she saw the skeleton on the floor.

“An old friend,” Xavo shrugged softly as he picked up a chair that had been tipped over.

He placed the chair at a nearby table and ushered Lady Mystic into it. He then walked around the table and sat opposite her.

“Who was he?” she asked.

“His name was Brakas,” answered Xavo. “He was a Fakaran who aided Vand’s mages here. His death was satisfying, but I hid the room to avoid anyone discovering the body before I caught up with Smarc at the mouth of the Meliban River.”

“So no one knows that this room even exists?” asked Lady Mystic.

“I cannot guarantee that,” shrugged Xavo, “but we should be safer here than anywhere else that I can think of. What were those soldiers saying about a half million dead warriors?”

“I have no idea,” confessed Vand’s daughter, “but I did notice the mark of the hellsoul on each of those soldiers at the entrance to the temple. My father appears to be forming a formidable army to deal with the Torak.”

“And it appeared that the Torak’s forces were actually winning this war,” sighed Xavo. “Vand sacrificed a million men in attempts to secure the mainland. Do you think that was all a ruse to allow him to return here without opposition?”

“No,” Lady Mystic answered after some thought. “I think my father has had a lot of time to dwell upon his revenge. I am sure that he worked out several different attacks to control the mainland. The other invasions were serious attempts to annihilate the people living here, but it was not his only plan. The defense of Vandegar may not even be his last plan. There is no way to know.”

“Well there are some things that we must find out,” Xavo declared as he stripped off his pack and withdrew his black cloak and put it on.

“You are leaving the room already?” asked Lady Mystic. “Why not rest a bit first?”

“We do not know how long Pakar will be gone from the temple,” answered Xavo. “The soldiers are conditioned not to interfere with a mage, so it makes sense to find out what we can as quickly as we can. You can rest here while I go sniffing around.”

“That is hardly an option,” Lady Mystic shook her head. “Two can search quicker than one. Let me get my cloak on before you unseal the door.”

* * *

Thousands of Fakaran tribesmen gathered at the great bulge of the Meliban River, which was halfway between the Valley of Bones and Vandegar. The free tribes had followed the north fork of the river, while the Jiadin had proceeded along the south fork. The ancient forests along the banks of the Meliban River had escaped the devastation wrought by the mages of the old invaders, and the two massive armies met under the thick canopy to begin their ride across the open plains towards Vandegar.

By the time the free tribes reached the meeting place, the Jiadin had been waiting for two days. King Rejji, shaman Bakhai, and Marshal Wyant dismounted and walked towards the Jiadin encampment. Wyant led the way through the Jiadin camps until he saw the Jiadin leader. Harmagan rose with three of his fellow tribesmen.

“We meet again, Marshal,” smiled Harmagan. “I am sure you remember my little brother, Scarab. The others are Jaker and Niger. What took you so long? We have been waiting days for you and we had the longest path to get here.”

Rejji stared open-mouthed at Harmagan’s brother. His mouth opened to speak, but Bakhai’s hand was quick to land upon his brother’s arm. He purposely stepped in front of Rejji and spoke.

“It is proper to show respect to the king,” admonished the shaman.

Harmagan frowned in confusion for a moment, but his recovery was quick enough to avoid embarrassment. He bowed towards King

Rejji.

"We meant no disrespect," the Jiadin said earnestly. "It is hard for the Jiadin to grow accustomed to such formalities."

Rejji smiled and nodded as he stepped around Bakhai.

"Then let us sit and talk," Rejji said in a friendly manner. "I am not used to these formalities either."

The men sat around a fire, and Harmagan ordered food for the new arrivals.

"We had expected you sooner," Harmagan said as he tried to assess the young man who changed the whole of Fakara. "Did you have problems along the way?"

"No problems at all," answered Wyant. "We only travel half days."

"Half days?" echoed Harmagan. "I do not understand. If we continue at such a slow pace, the Khadorans will have killed the Motangans before we get to Vandegar."

"There is no need to rush," smiled Rejji. "The Khadorans are two days away from Vandegar. Even at half day rides, we will arrive in plenty of time for the Jiadin to shed much blood."

"But there are only fifty thousand Motangans there," objected Jaker. "The Jiadin alone could handle such a force, and we could be at Vandegar within a day. Let us ride on ahead and save the Khadorans from the horrors of combat."

"The tales of Vand's strength are mere rumors," interrupted Harmagan's brother, Scarab. "Let me ride on ahead and assess the situation."

"Alone?" questioned Wyant.

Harmagan laughed loudly and everyone stared at him curiously.

"My little brother is fearless," he boasted. "He has been talking for days about going on ahead to scout things out. The thing is, I believe he can do it and come back alive. I think the king should seriously consider his offer."

Rejji looked at Bakhai questioningly, and the shaman shrugged noncommittally. Wyant appeared to be greatly confused.

"Let me discuss this with my shaman and sheriff," Rejji stated as he rose.

The three Fakarans stepped away from the campfire and spoke in hushed tones.

"Just what is going on here?" asked Rejji. "Is there some joke that I am not aware of?"

"Joke?" balked Wyant. "I do not think Harmagan means any disrespect. If he is guilty of anything, perhaps it is overconfidence. He believes that his brother can do almost anything. I would like to point out that Scarab was instrumental in getting the Jiadin to ally with us.

He also saved my life in Meliban. Maybe he can successfully infiltrate the Motangan defenses."

"The joke is on you, Wyant," smiled Bakhai. "The one you call Scarab is really named Fisher. He is Emperor Marak's personal friend and spy. The real question is what is he doing here?"

"Fisher?" echoed Wyant as a crimson tone spread across his face. "But how could Harmagan possibly believe that Fisher is his brother?"

"He doesn't believe it," replied Rejji. "Obviously, Fisher has some hold over Harmagan."

"More likely," interjected Bakhai, "Harmagan owes his life to Fisher. Whatever the reason, we should not let on that we know who Scarab is."

"I also owe my live to Fisher, or Scarab, or whatever you want to call him," nodded Wyant. "If he is Marak's spy, there may be a chance that he could assess the situation at Vandegar. What is the harm in letting him try?"

"I think it is an excellent idea," grinned Bakhai. "If nothing else, it would stop Harmagan from wondering why we are moving so slowly each day. We can say that we must allow Scarab the time to fully scout out the Motangan armies."

"True," Rejji nodded vigorously. "The free tribes are already questioning our pace. I do not need to add the constant questioning from the Jiadin. Call Scarab over."

Wyant returned to the campfire and requested the presence of Harmagan's little brother. Scarab smiled tautly and joined the group.

"Thank you for not exposing me," Fisher said softly. "Scarab is a persona that I could not duplicate."

"I can well imagine the truth to that statement," smiled Rejji. "When this is all over, I want to hear the full story."

"So you shall," grinned Fisher.

"Can you really infiltrate the Motangans safely?" asked Bakhai.

"Safely?" echoed Fisher. "Nothing that I do can be done safely, but I am the best at what I do."

"What do you truly hope to accomplish at Vandegar?" asked Wyant.

"There are several pieces of information that will be essential to see this matter closed," answered Fisher. "We need to verify that Vand is indeed at Vandegar. We need to know what surprises he has up his sleeves, and if he has other forces that could be brought in behind us. The man seems to have an uncanny knowledge of our movements, and that causes me to worry about his strategy."

"Do you need help?" asked Rejji. "I am sure that I could find others with the necessary skills to accompany you."

"I work best alone," Fisher shook his head. "It will be hard

enough to get away from Harmagan without him sending an escort with me."

"Does he know who you are?" asked Rejji.

"He does," nodded Fisher, "but he will never tell anyone. He will maintain that I am his brother until his dying breath."

"Impressive," acknowledged Wyant.

"Get your gear together and leave when you are ready," ordered King Rejji. "I will keep Harmagan occupied with other matters."

Fisher nodded gratefully and ran off into the Jiadin encampment. The three Fakarans returned to the Jiadin campfire and sat down with Harmagan, Jaker, and Niger.

"Your brother is a most amazing man," smiled Rejji as he sat down. "His courage and dedication speaks volumes of the bravery of the Jiadin."

Harmagan and the other Jiadin beamed with pride, and the Jiadin leader signaled for Jaker and Niger to follow Scarab.

"Stay," ordered King Rejji. "You have not been dismissed yet."

"They are going with Scarab," objected Harmagan. "He needs someone to watch his flanks."

"Have you so little faith in the skills of your brother?" questioned Rejji. "Besides, I have decided to ride the rest of the way to Vandegar with the Jiadin as my escort. I would like Jaker and Niger to be my personal escorts, with you at my side of course."

A look of surprise spread over Harmagan's face, but he beamed with pride. Even though the Jiadin had ceased their war with the free tribes, they still felt like outsiders.

"It would be our pleasure," Harmagan said with a bow of his head. "I could arrange for others to ride with Scarab."

"Scarab just rode out of camp," smiled Wyant. "I do not think he needs any help in what he plans to do. You must be very proud of him, Harmagan."

"I am," Harmagan conceded worriedly. "All Jiadin are proud of him, but I worry for his safety. Let me send someone after him."

"The night Scarab saved my life," Wyant shook his head, "he told me that he prefers to work alone. I think I understand why now, but we must allow him to do what he does best."

Harmagan stared into Wyant's eyes trying to determine if he knew Scarab's secret, but the marshal was stone-faced. Finally, the Jiadin leader nodded in acquiescence.

"It will only be for a day," Harmagan sighed.

"It will be two days," corrected Rejji. "We will continue to ride half days. We must allow Scarab time to assess the enemy before blindly charging forward."

"You are right," agreed Harmagan as the Fakarans got up to

leave.

The Jiadin waited until the king and his party had left before talking among themselves.

“What happened?” asked Jaker. “I know something is going on, but I cannot tell what it is.”

“Why does the king want us to ride with him?” questioned Niger. “Why did they speak to Scarab alone?”

“And why are we riding half days?” added Jaker.

“You ask too many questions,” bellowed Harmagan, but those very questions were rolling around in his own mind.

“Are we wrong to question things?” asked Niger.

“No,” Harmagan sighed heavily. “Scarab is a convincing person. I am sure that he insisted that he could spy on the Motangans and that he could do so alone. The king obviously agreed.”

“And the king is riding with us to spy on us?” posed Jaker.

“I don’t think so,” replied Harmagan. “He has no need to spy himself. He has many under his command that could do that for him. I suspect that he wants to completely heal the rift between the tribes. Maybe this is his way of doing that.”

“Alright,” conceded Niger, “but what about the half day rides? He says that is to allow Scarab time to spy, but the free tribes have been doing half days since the Valley of Bones.”

“Now that is a true mystery,” granted Harmagan. “I want you two to filter through the camps of the free tribes and find out what you can. No Fakaran horseman rides half days when a battle is ensured at the end of the trail. There is a reason for the king’s pace, and he has not yet revealed it to us. I want to know his secret.”

“You can count on us,” grinned Niger as he and Jaker rose eagerly from the campfire.

Chapter 40

The Gathering Storm

Fisher dismounted at the western edge of the woods and set his horse free. He did not intend to ride into the enemy encampment, and the sight of a free horse roaming the plains would cause a curiosity that he preferred not to happen. It was still a long walk to Vandegar, but the sun would be setting soon. If he encountered no difficulties and kept up a decent pace, the spy could be in Vandegar when the sun rose in the morning.

Fisher stripped off his Jiadin disguise and pulled a Motangan uniform from his pack. He had last used the uniform on the Island of Darkness and it was in good shape. He rolled his Jiadin clothes up and shoved them to the bottom of the pack in case anyone wanted to give a cursory inspection of his belongings. Attired as a Motangan soldier, the spy stepped out of the forest and headed westward.

For the first several hours, Fisher's mind wandered. He walked through the dark wondering what he would find in Vandegar, but when his musings turned to thoughts about whether or not he would survive the coming incursion, Fisher knew that he was in trouble. One lesson that the spy had learned early in his career was never to go into a situation doubting the successful conclusion of the mission. To achieve success in such a daring profession, there could be no room for doubt.

Fisher immediately forced his concentration towards the brightest image of his future, and soon a broad smile played across his lips. An image sprang into his mind that brought joy to his heart. It was the image of Elly, the daughter of Lord Chenowith. He remembered the night that they had met when he posed as a Walkan soldier. The young woman had let him into the mansion and served him tea. At the time Fisher was only interested in stealing some secret papers of the previous emperor of Khadora, but the spy soon found many excuses to return to the Walkan mansion, and a fond romance had blossomed with Lord Chenowith's daughter.

Fisher promised himself that when this war was over, he would return and ask for Elly's hand in marriage. And that, Fisher realized, was the heart of his problem. The Khadoran spy had never had anything to live for previously. It was that very lack of desire to live that had made him so effective. He took chances that other men would never think of taking, and his boldness paid off handsomely,

but now he had a very strong reason to live, and his thoughts returned to wondering if he would survive the journey to Vandegar. Fisher cursed inwardly as fear started to build up inside him, yet his feet never faltered. He continued marching westward through the dark night towards his destiny.

The sky lightened with a predawn glow as Fisher reached the eastern edge of the Motangan encampment. The enemy sentries were few, and they were spread out over a great distance. The spy altered his course slightly and casually walked towards an early morning campfire. If any of the sentries were alert enough to have seen him, they did not raise an alarm.

Most of the camp was still asleep, but Fisher intentionally headed towards a small group of soldiers who were up early having a morning coffee. They gave him a quizzical look as he walked into their midst.

“Can you spare a cup?” asked Fisher. “There is a bit of chill this morning.”

“There is a bit of chill every morning,” quipped a burly soldier. “Who are you?”

“Aki,” smiled the spy. “What’s your name?”

“The name is Savesto,” replied the burly man with suspicion, “but I have never seen you before. When did you join us? Who do you serve under?”

“I have been here about a month,” lied Aki. “I was originally assigned to Premer Cardijja, but he sent me here with a message last month. Premer Tzargo has been using me for odd tasks ever since. I feel like a fish out of water here.”

“Where are you camped?” asked another soldier.

“That is part of the problem,” sighed Aki. “I don’t even have a tent of my own. I spend most nights curled up in a corner inside the temple, but I can’t stand it in there any more. Most of the men inside the temple do not believe in bathing and the foul stench permeates the air. I came out for an early walk just to breath some clean air.”

The Motangan soldiers laughed heartily, and Savesto slapped Aki on the back and handed him a mug of coffee.

“And we thought we had it hard out here,” laughed Savesto. “We moved our tent as far away from the rest of the camp as we dared for just the same reason.”

“Won’t Tzargo be looking for you to run errands?” asked one of the Motangan soldiers.

“Probably not,” shrugged Aki as he sipped his coffee. “He hasn’t had anything for me to do in the last week. Perhaps he has forgotten that I exist.”

“One can only hope,” smiled Savesto.

Aki downed the warm coffee and extended his arm to get a refill.

He was extremely thirsty from the long dry walk and the coffee went down easily. As he waited for Savesto to pour more coffee he noticed one of the other soldiers rise with concern on his face.

"You do not bear the mark of the hellsoul," he said accusingly to Aki.

Aki's eyes flicked left and right and saw the small mark on each of the men's wrists. A tremor started to race through his body, and the spy sought to suppress it. All eyes around the campfire were glaring at him.

"No, I don't," Aki admitted calmly.

"How can that be?" Savesto asked with suspicion. "You said that you have been here for a month, and it has not been that long since the rites were given. It was required of everyone."

"I must have been on one of Tzargo's errands," Aki shrugged. "In any event, no one has ordered me to submit to it, and I am not about to volunteer. Would any of you have participated if it was not required?"

Savesto's stern face softened, and he smiled once again.

"You are one lucky man, Aki," Savesto said. "I know that we are supposed to be thrilled to rise from the dead to once again serve the Emperor, but I personally find it distasteful. If I am struck down in battle, I would just as soon die."

"That's the truth of it," nodded one of the other soldiers. "I wonder if there is any way to get rid of it?"

"If there is," interjected another soldier, "we won't find it in the next two days, and by then it will be too late. I heard that the Khadorans will be here within two days. This waiting to fight is almost over for us."

"We will probably never even see any action," retorted Savesto. "The Khadorans have to get through the army of the dead before they reach us, and there can't be that many of them left after Shamal's invasion."

"And even if they manage to get through the army of the dead," offered another soldier, "we are the easternmost part of the camp. The Khadorans will come from the west, and all would have to be lost before we end up fighting."

Fisher desperately wanted to know what the army of the dead was, but asking it directly would surely raise more suspicions.

"Do you think enough Khadorans could have survived to outnumber the army of the dead?" Aki asked.

"Inconceivable," Savesto shook his head. "I don't think there were a half million Khadorans to begin with."

"Well I hope the Khadorans kill a good portion of them," one of the other soldiers said softly. "I don't mind saying that I feel ill having

those dead skeletons around me."

"You may not mind saying it," warned Savesto, "but you will lose your tongue if you say it anywhere away from this campfire. Keep your thoughts to yourself lad."

"He's right, though," added another soldier. "Why do you think Tzargo ordered them back into the city of Vandegar? All of our men were getting jittery with them around. No doubt he was worried about desertions."

"That's enough," bellowed Savesto as he glanced at Aki to gauge his reaction to the comments."

"I agree with them," Aki said softly to Savesto. "Their words will not pass my lips if that is what you are worried about."

Savesto grinned and nodded as he poured more coffee into Aki's mug.

"You are alright, Aki," he declared. "You are welcome to join our group out here if you wish. It is about the safest place in the encampment."

"I would like that," smiled Aki. "I will have to return to the temple occasionally just to make sure that Tzargo is not looking for me, but the rest of the time I would be pleased to spend here with men like you."

* * *

Thousands of Khadorans in blue and green uniforms snaked through the forest below the Fortung Mountains. The soldiers of the Aritor clan were impressive upon their war steeds, but they were only the vanguard of the Khadoran army. The column that wound back through the forest, up the mountainside, and through the pass, was a rainbow of colors. Every clan in Khadora was represented by their finest fighters, and the column stretched over many leagues.

Lord Faliman, leader of the Aritor clan and member of the Lords' Council, led the procession. On his left rode Lord Marshal Stanton of the Aritor clan, and on his right rode a solitary figure in the orange and yellow of the Balomar clan. The plumes upon his helm denoted that he was the marshal of the Balomar clan. That man was Marshal Berman, and he had been chosen to lead the Khadorans into battle.

"The forest will end soon," Marshal Berman declared. "I want the Aritor troops to set up a perimeter for the rest of the army."

"You intend to halt the advance early in the day?" questioned Lord Marshal Stanton.

"I do," nodded Marshal Berman. "When we exit this forest, our forces will spread out in a wide line. We cannot afford to have troops leagues behind us. We also cannot afford for the enemy to flank us. We will make camp here until all of the clans have congregated."

"The Lords' Council assured me that the Aritor clan would lead

the charge," asserted Lord Faliman. "Are you suggesting that my troops will merely be part of the line?"

"I think that is best," sighed Marshal Berman, "but I serve at the pleasure of the Emperor and the Lords' Council. If the Lords' Council has promised you the vanguard, I will yield to their decision, but the rest of the clans will line up as I command. Lord Marshal, if you would direct the clans as they arrive so that our camps stretch out evenly to the left and right of our current position, I would be most grateful."

"As you command, Marshal Berman," saluted the Lord Marshal.

"I am going to take a short ride in each direction to view the lay of the land," declared Marshal Berman.

The Balomar marshal turned and rode out of the forest.

"Uppity for a marshal, isn't he?" remarked Lord Faliman.

"He is," agreed Lord Marshal Stanton, "but I hear he has good reason to be. His leadership in the prior battles has been admirable."

"And he has been a favorite of Emperor Marak's since the battle at the Balomar estate before all of this invasion nonsense started," replied Lord Faliman, "but I still think you would have been a far better choice to lead this invasion."

"I am pleased by your words, Lord Faliman," smiled Stanton, "and I must admit that it grates at me to take orders from a simple marshal, but I can find no fault with Berman's reasoning nor his orders so far."

"Then you think this delay is necessary?" asked Lord Faliman.

"I do," nodded Stanton. "I merely posed the question to Berman to hear his justification. If I may be so bold as to speak frankly?"

"Of course," nodded the Aritor lord.

"I also think it is unwise for the Aritor clan to be out in front of the line," Stanton declared. "If the whole line is attacked, our forward position will cause chaos and confusion as we try to retreat into the line. I believe that Marshal Berman was wise to question your request."

"I doubt that fifty thousand Motangans are going to come out of that ancient temple to attack us," retorted Lord Faliman. "We are almost as numerous as they are, and we are mounted. More likely they will drop their weapons and run for their lives, and our biggest worry will be tracking them all down."

"Our prior engagements with the Motangans have not shown any propensity towards cowardice," countered Lord Marshal Stanton. "I think the Motangans will not only stand and fight, but to win they must use a superior strategy. It is only my opinion."

"And I value your opinion," sighed Lord Faliman, "but there are other consideration at play here."

“Such as?” asked the lord marshal.

“I am the newest member of the Lords’ Council,” replied Lord Faliman. “All of the others were present when Lord Marak was made Emperor of Khadora. As such, they have a much closer bond with our Emperor. I must have some victory of my own to gain the prestige that the other lords have. That is why I requested the vanguard. To abandon it now that the council has acceded to my wishes would be unacceptable.”

“It would smack of cowardice,” agreed Lord Marshal Stanton. “I understand completely. We will make you proud in the coming battle, Lord Faliman. You can depend on us.”

“I know that I can,” smiled the Aritor lord. “Tomorrow will be a glorious day for the Aritor clan.”

Not far away, hidden in the trees of the forest, a black-hooded man smiled inwardly as he stealthily moved away from the congregating armies of Khadora. He ran quietly though the trees for over an hour before coming to a small camp. Sitting around the small camp were twelve other black-hooded men, and they all looked up in anticipation as the runner entered the clearing.

“The attack will be tomorrow,” the spy stated. “Their forces will be arrayed in a long line with only the Aritor clan out in front. Some of them are not expecting much of a fight.”

“Then they will be greatly surprised,” smiled Pakar.

“Have you discovered anything about the Chula and the elves?” the spy asked.

“Indeed,” nodded Pakar. “Look up in the sky to our south.”

The spy moved to get a clear view of the southern sky and saw a dragon circling the summit of the mountains. Although it was at a great distance, he could also detect a man riding atop the dragon.

“That would be the Torak,” Pakar answered the unspoken question, “and he is not circling the pass because he is alone. He is surveying the other half of his army.”

“Are we sure it is the Chula and the elves?” asked the spy.

“It can be nothing else,” declared Pakar. “Both the elves and the Chula are well versed in magic, so none of us are foolish enough to get any closer. You may if you wish, but I am convinced.”

“As am I,” the spy quickly nodded. “I will gladly meet their mages on the field of battle, but I am not foolish enough to attack them single-handedly. Will the dragon see us returning to Vandegar?”

“We will use illusions to hide ourselves,” Pakar shook his head. “The sun is already rising high in the sky, and the heat that bakes the plain will cause shimmering anyway. We will not be detected.”

* * *

The black-clad Sakovan rode his large warbird back along the

forest trail until he saw the Sakovan column coming towards him. He halted his choka and silently raised his arm, his hand moving in the air to form a large circle. Without comment, the large column of Sakovans began to spread out and set up camp. HawkShadow sat on his choka and watched silently until Lyra, StarWind, and Temiker reached him.

"Why are we camping here?" asked StarWind. "There is time to make more progress today."

"We are ahead of schedule," answered the assassin. "I promised that our detour to the west would not slow us down. Now you know that I was correct. We are but a half-day's ride to Lake Jabul."

"I still don't understand why we came so far to the west," frowned Lyra. "From the maps we looked at in Meliban, we could have been in Vandegar already."

"We would also have been seen approaching the ancient temple," replied HawkShadow. "The forests have not completely recovered in Fakara, but if we follow the Jabul River, we can reach all the way to Lake Jabul using the concealment of the trees."

"HawkShadow is correct," interjected Temiker. "The Motangan maps that we looked at in Meliban are poor. While they depicted most natural features of the land, they did not include the changes that the Chula mages have made in their attempts to rejuvenate the land of Fakara."

"And how did you know this, HawkShadow?" questioned StarWind.

"I am just clever," grinned the assassin.

"Actually," Temiker interjected, "I spoke with Angragar. I asked them for the safest approach to Vandegar, and they detailed the route that we should take."

StarWind shot HawkShadow a piercing glare, and Lyra laughed as the assassin tried to appear innocent of any wrongdoing.

"You could have told me, HawkShadow," StarWind said accusingly. "Why the mystery surrounding our route?"

"That is my fault," Temiker said in an attempt to forestall the bickering. "Yltar was not entirely sure how much the forests had grown this far to the west of Angragar, but he thought that following the Jabul River offered the safest route. I asked HawkShadow not to depend upon natural cover for the entire trip."

"This is not a subject that I wish to waste words on," declared the Star of Sakova, putting an end to the conversation. "The only question I have regarding our route is what do we do when we reach the south end of Lake Jabul. Surely there will be no cover for our journey around the lake, and we are only five hundred strong."

"We will not proceed any farther than the end of the forest,"

answered HawkShadow.

“We will not press on to the ancient temple?” frowned Lyra.

“No,” HawkShadow replied. “The Sakovans came to this land to destroy the garrison at Meliban. That was the task that the Torak requested of us. We have accomplished our mission. Our journey to Vandegar is to give aid to our allies in the final battle. I think the best way that we can accomplish that is to remain hidden until we can determine where we can be of help.”

“An excellent plan,” stated StarWind. After a short pause to allow her husband a few moments of gloating, she continued, “However, the Star of Sakova must join with the Torak and the Astor to defeat Vand and Dobuk. While our tiny forces may not be decisive in the coming battle, we cannot simple hide and wait to see what happens. The five hundred Sakovans around us are merely the escort of the Star of Sakova. We are to get her safely to the ancient temple at Vandegar.”

“A valid point, HawkShadow,” sighed Temiker. “We did not consider that in our plans.”

The assassin had a pained expression as StarWind’s words struck him like a smith’s hammer.

“It is a long way around the lake,” HawkShadow eventually said, “and our presence will be obvious to all if we are riding our warbirds, but there is no time left to find an alternate route.”

The Star of Sakova stepped away from the group as her three closest advisors continued to discuss the best way of reaching the temple. She found an isolated spot in the woods and wove an air tunnel to the palace at Khadoratung.

“This is the Star of Sakova,” Lyra said after an air mage had accepted her air tunnel. “I must speak with the Torak immediately.”

Within moments she heard the voice of Marak.

“Be careful what you say,” warned the Torak. “We cannot trust the safety of the air tunnel at this late stage.”

“I understand,” replied Lyra, “but we have a problem. Our primary task is complete, and we have traveled far from that port city. Our problem now is one of the best approach to our next target. Do you remember the day that you showed me the skimmers in Fakara?”

“A day that I will never forget,” Marak smiled as he remembered the lake outside of Angragar where the secret skimmers had been built.

“We are in a similar position today,” continued Lyra. “It is a beautiful place somewhat reminiscent of the Sakova, but not for long. We are unsure how best to proceed from this point.”

The Torak put the clues together and realized that the Sakovans were in the forest south of the lake.

“I think you have progressed far enough for now,” replied Marak.

“There is no certainty of what is to greet us, and I would not wish for you to be involved in the early stages. Let’s wait to see what develops.”

“Just sit and wait?” frowned the Star of Sakova.

“Do not make it sound like a punishment,” chuckled the Torak. “In fact, some old friends will be joining you shortly.”

“Friends?” questioned Lyra.

“Certainly an old friend of HawkShadow’s,” grinned Marak. “Some of her new friends will be with her, too, not to mention my relatives and some of their relatives.”

“Now that is exciting,” Lyra brightened. “Is this by chance?”

“Kaltara never leaves much to chance,” chuckled Marak. “Sit tight, Lyra. He will guide you. I have to go.”

“I love you, Torak,” Lyra said quickly before the air tunnel was dropped.

“I will love you forever, Lyra,” Marak said and then the air tunnel was gone.

Lyra’s face was aglow when she returned to HawkShadow, StarWind, and Temiker. Her three advisors halted their conversation and stared at the Star of Sakova as she approached.

“Are you alright?” asked StarWind.

“I have never felt better,” beamed Lyra. “HawkShadow, notify our sentries that we will have visitors soon. Warn them not to be too quick with their weapons. The visitors are friendly.”

“Friendly?” echoed the Sakovan assassin. “Who is coming, and how do you know about it?”

“The elves and Chula will be joining us,” declared Lyra. “Marak says that we should remain in the forest until we see how things go in the initial skirmish.”

“You used an air tunnel?” gasped StarWind. “You do know that Vand may have the ability to intercept such communications, don’t you?”

“Of course I know,” replied Lyra, “but Marak and I share many memories that are not common knowledge. Nothing was said that would give our enemy any comfort.”

“The same way that Rhodella and I used to be able to talk in front of people and not have them understand what we were saying,” smiled Temiker.

“So it turns out that we are exactly where we should be,” HawkShadow said with an air of triumph.

“Kaltara watches over us,” nodded Lyra. “Warn those sentries, HawkShadow. We do not want casualties among our friends.”

Chapter 41

In the Belly of the Beast

Fisher walked through the Motangan encampment towards the ancient temple. He avoided everyone along his path, but he kept his ears open to pick up whatever information was available. Mostly what he heard were the rumblings of an army preparing for battle. There were rumors and boasting, but most of the talk was typical of men trying to hide their fear of the coming combat. The spy could almost feel sympathy for the Motangan soldiers, but he knew that these men were determined to kill his friends and anyone else who dared to object to the rule of Emperor Vand. The Khadoran spy reached the temple and mounted the stairs to the large doors leading inside. Two Motangan soldiers stationed at the doors stopped him.

"What business do you have inside?" demanded one of the guards.

"I must report to Premer Tzargo," lied Fisher.

"Report to your section commander," the guard shook his head. "You have no business inside the temple."

The heads of nearby soldiers swiveled towards the confrontation. It was probably a scene that was played out numerous times over the course of a single day, but Fisher loathed being the center of attention. He also knew that if he failed to gain entry on the first attempt, he would never get in. The guards would grow more suspicious each time he returned to try again. Fisher's body stiffened and grew rigid as he stepped closer to the guard.

"I was told to keep watch on the eastern perimeter and report any abnormalities directly to Premer Tzargo," Fisher said as forcefully as he could. "If I am not permitted to perform my duties, I will make sure that both of you are listed as the reason for my failure."

The guard stepped back a pace from the verbal assault, but he still gazed at Fisher with suspicion. Many soldiers tried to gain entrance to the temple merely to get out of the sun, and he had strict orders to admit only those with permission.

"The eastern perimeter?" balked the guard. "The attack is coming from the west."

The other guard stepped forward and appraised Fisher with a keen eye.

"What group are you with?" he asked.

"I am with Premer Cardijja," declared Fisher. "I brought a

message to Premer Tzargo last month and have since been assigned to watch the eastern perimeter. I am currently staying with Savesto's group."

"I know Savesto," the second guard said cautiously. "He is indeed on the eastern perimeter. He likes to stay as far away from the temple as possible. He's not a very personable fellow."

"No, he isn't," Fisher agreed harshly, "but he has never interfered with my mission either. Are you going to step aside, or do I have to summon an officer to report that you feel the need to override Premer Tzargo's orders?"

"I still don't get it," frowned the first guard. "There should be nothing to report to the east. What is it that you have seen that is so important?"

"What I have to report," Fisher seethed with feigned hostility, "I will report to Premer Tzargo as ordered, not to a door guard with an over inflated opinion of his own importance."

The first guard stiffened at the rebuke, but the second guard chuckled.

"Ouch," quipped the second guard. "Those are fighting words. Why don't you let him pass before the two of you end up on the injured list?"

The first guard turned and glared at his companion. "I suppose you will merely stand by and watch?" he asked his partner.

"If the man wants shade bad enough to fight you for it," shrugged the second guard, "I am not getting involved. Besides, there is a fair chance that his story is true. I am not about to offer myself up for a grievance with the Premer. Let him by."

The first guard turned and glared at Fisher again, but his stance softened.

"We will ask Premer Tzargo about your mission later," he warned Fisher. "If you lied to us, we will see you hanged for it. Get moving."

Fisher wasn't sure from the man's words if he was being dismissed or admitted to the temple, but he knew where he needed to go. He walked past the guard and opened the door, half expecting a sword to be thrust into his back. He breathed a sigh of relief as the door closed behind him. As for the man's promise to interrogate the Premer, Fisher recognized that as mere bravado. No door guard would dare to admit that he had let someone into the temple that he was unsure of.

Fisher moved away from the door in almost total blindness. The gloomy interior was like total darkness compared to the blazing sun outside. He waited a few minutes to let his eyes adjust to gloom and then moved cautiously towards the interior. For the next couple of hours, the spy roamed around the interior of the palace, his ears

constantly straining to pick up snippets of conversation. While there was talk about the coming battle, he learned nothing startling. No battle strategies were openly discussed, and he heard nothing to indicate that the Motangans were aware of any approaching force other than the Khadorans. He began to feel as if the visit to the temple had been a waste of time, but there was one major item on his list that he had not yet accomplished.

Fisher made his way to the top of the stairs. The top level of the temple was the location of the throne room, and a large contingent of soldiers stood between the two staircases. Fisher knew that he would never gain entrance to the throne room to verify that Vand was indeed there, but the top level also led to the roof of the temple, and it was there that Fisher wanted to go.

The Khadoran spy turned away from the throne room and moved along a corridor where the sunshine was streaming in from the far end. He shielded his eyes from the brilliant sun as he stepped out onto the roof. Squinting as he surveyed the roof, he saw no one. The roof of the temple was a vast flat area broken only by the small section of the temple in the center that rose slightly higher. Once out the doorway, Fisher turned to the north and headed for the edge of the roof.

He halted at the edge and stared into the distance at the ancient city of Vandegar. As his eyes became accustomed to the brightness, the spy saw movement in the ancient city. His mouth fell open and his eyes twitched as he watched skeleton-like figures moving about. There were untold thousands of the creatures, and Fisher felt a shiver race up his spine. He found it hard to believe what he was watching, a whole city infested with dead warriors, but warriors that weren't quite dead, for the dead did not walk around and carry swords. The Khadoran spy instantly knew that it was urgent to get word of this discovery back to the Astor.

"What are you doing out here?" demanded a voice of authority. "This area is strictly forbidden."

Fisher turned slowly and saw a Motangan officer standing a mere pace away. The officer held his sword ready as he glared at Fisher.

"I got lost," Fisher shrugged nervously.

"And you will remain lost forever," the officer snarled as he raised his sword.

"Wait," pleaded Fisher. "I am not really lost. I heard about the ancient city of Vandegar. I just had to see what we are fighting for. Spare me this one time. Please."

"Only the god Vand can spare you from my wrath," snapped the officer as his sword began to swing towards Fisher's neck, "and he will have to do it in your next life."

Fisher dropped to the floor as the sword swung over his head. The

spy landed on his rump and promptly swiveled his body, using his feet to sweep the officer's legs out from under him. The officer fell to the floor, and Fisher leaped upon the man's body, a knife sliding from its arm sheath into his hand. Even as Fisher drove the knife deep into the officer's heart, he knew that he was caught. Beyond the body of the officer, Fisher saw a pair of feet approaching rapidly. The feet protruded out of a black cloak, and Fisher's eyes rose to see a Motangan mage approaching. The mage's hand darted out before him, and the spy knew that a spell was about to be cast. Fisher rolled frantically away from the dead officer in a futile attempt to avoid the magical spell. He heard the air sizzle at the unleashing of the magical spell and waited for the pain to envelope his body.

"Don't you know that all of the soldiers here are hellsouls?" asked the mage. "You must always decapitate them."

Fisher looked up in amazement at the Motangan mage. His eyes darted towards the officer and saw his head rolling about the floor. He looked back at the mage in confusion, and the mage smiled as he pulled his hood slightly back to allow Fisher to see his face.

"Xavo?" gasped Fisher. "How did you get here?"

"I would not say my name too loudly," grinned the mage. "Xavo is wanted just as dead as Aakuta in these parts. This is no time to dally. Throw the body over the edge of the roof and follow me quickly. The demons will be returning soon."

"Over the edge?" objected Fisher as he got to his feet. "The soldiers down below will be alerted."

"Hardly," Xavo shook his head. "Vand throws his incompetents off the roof every day. What we don't want to happen is for the demons to find a slain body here when they return. Hurry up."

Fisher asked no further questions. He hurled the body over the edge of the roof and tossed the head after it. He picked up the officer's sword and hurried after Xavo who was already half way to the doorway leading inside. Fisher ran to catch up and followed Xavo closely. The mage led the spy down the stairs to his hidden room and then sealed the door. Lady Mystic was already in the room and waiting.

"I trust you got to him before he was discovered?" she asked Xavo.

"Not exactly," Xavo shook his head, "but I think we are alright. There was just another officer discarded from the roof."

"You knew I was here?" gasped Fisher.

"We have been watching you for hours," smiled Lady Mystic. "You have a certain mastery of your profession. I have admired the way you handle yourself."

"We have no time for adoration," interrupted Xavo. "Those dead

warriors that you were so absorbed in watching will be moving out of the city tonight. Once they are in position, you will be unable to leave Vandegar. You need to get out of the area immediately. Carry word of what you have learned."

"I will leave soon," promised Fisher, "but I must know more. What are these demons that you speak of?"

"There are six of them," explained Lady Mystic. "Three of them are searching for Angragar, but they will return soon."

"The other three are dining with Dobuk, which is the only thing that saved you from a certain death," added Xavo. "They normally inhabit the roof, and I would not have been able to save you if they had been out there. It is said that they are immune to magic."

"They are immune to magic," declared Lady Mystic. "There are five hundred thousand dead warriors that will be deployed tonight. They will form an outer ring around the temple and Premer Tzargo's troops, which are all hellsouls by the way."

"I found that out," frowned Fisher.

"Vand also has thirteen mages with him here," stated Xavo. "Their leader is Pakar, and each of them is greatly accomplished. We will try to keep them out of the battle, but there are no guarantees. The two of us can only do so much, and our main goal is Dobuk."

"You are going to confront the Great Demon?" Fisher asked with awe.

"Someone must," sighed Xavo. "I do not want to think of my daughter being forced to deal with him."

"How have you learned so much?" questioned the Khadoran spy.

"We have used air tunnels," offered Lady Mystic.

"I thought we were not supposed to be using them except in an emergency?" frowned Fisher. "If they are safe to use now, you could send this information to Marak, and I could stay and help you."

"We are only using the air tunnel to hear conversations," Xavo shook his head. "No one can detect that, but it would be disastrous to try sending a message. Get on your horse and get the message back to the Torak."

"I have no horse," sighed Fisher, "and I came from the Fakarans. From what I have heard around the camp, I will not be able to escape to the west. Everyone knows that the Khadorans are coming towards us from the west. Amusingly, no one is expecting any attack from the east. They are in for a surprise. The Fakarans are twice as strong as the Khadorans and probably better suited to fight in this terrain."

"Don't be too sure about the surprise," warned Lady Mystic. "Those demons might notice the Fakarans coming towards us."

"The important thing is get word to someone out there that the size of the defenders is ten times larger than they expect," stressed

Xavo. “They need to know about the skeletons.”

“Can they be killed?” asked Fisher.

“I don’t know,” admitted Xavo. “It is my feeling that anything alive can be killed, and that includes the dead warriors. There is some life form that is allowing them to move and fight.”

“I would suggest decapitation,” interjected Lady Mystic. “It works on the hellsouls, and I have to believe the life forms are similar.”

“A valid guess,” nodded Xavo, “but, again, there are no guarantees.”

“Is there anything else that I need to know before I leave?” asked Fisher.

“Know that Kaltara will win this war,” smiled Lady Mystic. “Go quickly.”

Fisher stared at Lady Mystic for a short moment and shook his head in wonder. He smiled and bowed in respect to the Emperor’s daughter as Xavo unsealed the door and checked the corridor outside.

“Be swift, my Chula friend,” Xavo said in parting.

Fisher nodded and stepped out of the room as Xavo closed the door. He watched in amazement as the door suddenly disappeared, leaving a blank wall in its place. The spy moved swiftly to the stairs and made his way down to the ground level. He moved to the front doors and stepped out into the sunshine. The same two guards looked suspiciously at him.

“I had hoped that it was your body that had dropped from the roof,” the obstinate guard snarled offensively.

“Actually,” Fisher smiled, “it was the body of an officer that refused to let me speak with Premer Tzargo. The Premer was not amused by the antics of the pompous fool.”

The guard swallowed hard as Fisher grinned and moved quickly down the steps. The spy moved quickly, but casually through the throng of soldiers as he tried to figure out how he could steal a horse to make his escape. He was sure that horses would not be given to just any soldier who asked for one. In fact, horses were at a premium in the Motangan camp as the army was strictly infantry. Surely the keepers of the horses would demand some type of authorization from an officer before they allowed a horse to be taken, and Fisher had no time left to walk back to the Fakarans. He had to secure a horse. Fisher walked towards the eastern perimeter as his mind dwelled on the problem. He soon found himself near Savesto’s camp and moved towards it.

“Did you get roped into another assignment?” asked Savesto.

Fisher snapped out of his thoughts and looked at the Motangan soldier.

“Actually, I did get an assignment,” he answered, “and we are in

a great deal of trouble."

"Trouble?" the soldier echoed worriedly. "What kind of trouble?"

"I am not supposed to divulge such information," Fisher replied guardedly.

"But we are your friends," protested Savesto who was eager to hear the latest rumors. "You can trust us."

"Can I?" Fisher asked.

"Of course," the group answered in unison.

"We like you, Aki," Savesto said with sincerity. "If you are in trouble, we can help. What is the problem?"

"The Khadoran armies are much larger than we expected," Fisher said conspiratorially. "There is a great deal of concern inside the temple that the dead warriors might not be enough to destroy the Khadorans."

"The whole country of Khadora would have had to come eastward to defeat the dead warriors," retorted one of the soldiers.

"Exactly," nodded Aki. "Every able man in Khadora is on the way here. I have been ordered to get Premer Cardijja's army to come here immediately."

"That's great," exclaimed Savesto. "I don't have a problem with a few hundred thousand more warriors joining the fun. What is the problem with that?"

"The problem," Aki said with an air of failure, "is that I neglected to get authorization to use a horse. There is no way that I will reach Cardijja in time for his armies to get here."

"That is no problem," shrugged one of the men. "Just go back and get authorization."

"You don't understand," Aki shook his head. "The mood inside the temple is murderous. An officer made a suggestion that Premer Tzargo did not enjoy. He was immediately decapitated and thrown from the roof."

"I saw that," volunteered Savesto. "I wondered what the poor soul had done."

"Nothing more than speak when the Premer preferred silence," Aki replied. "There is no way that I am going back inside the temple and ask for authorization to use a horse."

"But the reinforcements won't make it in time if you walk," frowned one of the soldiers.

"I know," Aki nodded in defeat, "but what can I do?"

"You can steal a horse," declared Savesto.

"And get executed?" balked Aki.

"You won't get executed," smiled Savesto. "We will help you. We know some of the boys that work the corrals. We can distract them while you get the horse and ride out."

“Are you sure about this Savesto?” one of the soldiers asked nervously.

“If we don’t get reinforcements,” stated Savesto, “there is a decent chance that we will die in the coming battle. I’ve got a fair bit of gold with me that I am willing to give up to stay alive. What about the rest of you?”

“Gold is no good to a dead man,” shrugged one of the soldiers. “Count me in. How do you plan to do it?”

“Everyone knows that I am a unlucky person,” grinned Savesto. “One of you will happen to go down to the corrals and mention that I have a lot of gold and that I am gambling it away. That should draw most of the guards away.”

“What about the rest?” asked Aki. “Surely some of the guards will stay there.”

“The rest of my boys will hang around the corrals,” answered Savesto. “They will offer to take the guards’ places so the guards can come and take my gold. If necessary, they will start a fight with the guards to distract them while you steal the horse.”

Aki pulled a knife and cut his pouch free. He handed it to Savesto, and the Motangan whistled at the weight of it. Other soldiers handed over their gold and soon Savesto had quite a large pile.

“Let’s do it,” Aki said confidently.

One of Savesto’s soldiers ran ahead as the others walked slowly towards the corrals. Before the group reached the corrals, a soldier who had been running towards them halted in front of them.

“Is it true?” he asked the soldiers. “Is Savesto gambling all of his gold away?”

“He is,” nodded one of the soldiers. “I would love to take some of it from him, but I don’t have a stake to get in the game. Perhaps you could lend me some gold?”

The guard laughed loudly and took off running towards Savesto’s campsite.

“I guess that was a no,” chuckled the soldier.

Several more guards raced by, and by the time the small group reached the corrals, there were only two guards left.

“Well,” greeted one of the guards, “if it isn’t Savesto’s boys. I knew the rumor of him losing his gold was too good to be true. You boys wouldn’t be away from your campsite if there was gold to be had.”

“Actually,” admitted one of the soldiers, “Savesto has cleaned us out. He is now sitting on all of our gold as well as his own.”

“I have never known Savesto to be lucky,” the guard replied suspiciously.

“Me neither,” shrugged the soldier, “but it’s the truth. He cleaned

us all out."

"He must be cheating," declared the soldier.

"No doubt about it," nodded one of the soldiers, "but we couldn't catch him at it."

The two guards looked at each other and grinned.

"Well he can't cheat us," declared one of the guards. "I can spot a cheat every time. How would you boys like to earn some of your gold back?"

""Sure!" exclaimed one of Savesto's soldiers. "What do we have to do?"

"Just guard the corrals while we go clean out Savesto's little nest egg," grinned the guard. "We'll let you have some of your gold back when we return."

"And we better hurry before the others get it all," interjected the other guard.

"Go," one of the soldiers said. "Just make sure you get some of our gold back."

The two guards ran towards Savesto's campsite, and the soldiers left behind laughed out loud.

"Take your pick, Aki," chuckled one of the soldiers, "but be quick about it. Savesto's luck truly is lousy, and it won't take long for them to clean him out."

Aki did not hesitate. He leaped over the rail of the corral while the soldiers untied the gate and prepared to open it. Within minutes Aki had a horse saddled and raced out of the corral. The sentries along the eastern perimeter paid no attention to the racing messenger, and Fisher was soon out of sight of the camp.

Chapter 42

The Ancient Battlefield

Marshal Berman gazed to his left and observed the long line of Khadoran horsemen. A rainbow of uniforms extended far beyond the limitations of his eyesight. He nodded with pride and swiveled his head to the right. A mirror image presented itself; only the clan colors were different. Next he glanced over his shoulder at the horde of the Aritor clan, which was slightly in front of the rest of the line. The morning sun was just breaking the horizon, and the Vandegar Temple was visible far in the distance. As the first rays of the sun swept over the vast plain, the ground sparkled with a thousand pinpricks of reflected light.

"What the devil is that?" asked Lord Faliman. "Something is reflecting the light."

Lord Marshal Stanton rose up in his stirrups and gazed over the wasteland. For several moments his eyes tried to decipher what lay before him. Finally he nodded to himself and sat down with a sigh of relief.

"It is an old battlefield," he announced. "Thousands must have died here ages ago."

"Ages ago?" questioned the Aritor lord. "What do you see?"

"Nothing but a bunch of fallen skeletons on the ground," answered Lord Marshal Stanton. "The sun is reflecting off of their old swords."

"I do not recall hearing about any old battles here," frowned Lord Faliman.

"This used to be the home of the Jiadin warriors," explained Lord Marshal Stanton. "The temple at Vandegar was the center of their war of destruction. One can assume that many battles took place in this wasteland."

The vanguard had reached the edge of the ancient battlefield, and the Aritor clan rode onward, the hooves of the horses making a loud racket as they trampled the long deceased warriors and bones snapped beneath the weight.

"Why are the swords still shiny?" Marshal Berman muttered aloud.

"Not much rusts in the desert," shrugged Lord Marshal Stanton, "but the glare is blinding."

Marshal Berman grew increasingly nervous as the Aritor clan

moved further into the old battlefield. He rose up and turned to look behind him. The entire group of Aritor horsemen was riding over the skeletons, and the main line of the other Khadora clans was about to begin crunching bones as well. As he turned forward once again, his brow began sweating profusely, although the heat of the day had not yet begun.

"Something is not right here," Marshal Berman declared. "The Jiadin were horsemen as were all Fakaran warriors. Where are the horse skeletons? All we are seeing are the remains of men."

"You are right," frowned Lord Faliman. "Is it not also curious that each warrior died with his weapon in hand? Usually warriors lose their weapons in death, but not a one of these fallen soldiers is without his."

Marshal Berman held up his hand to halt the column.

"We are turning back," he stated.

"Because of this cemetery?" balked Lord Marshal Stanton.

"Because this is not natural," snapped Marshal Berman. "We will take the time to learn the true significance of this battlefield before we continue. Turn the men around Lord Marshal."

Lord Marshal Stanton hesitated a moment and then finally shouted the order to retreat. A horn blared the retreat, and the Aritor horsemen began to turn around. Unexpectedly, the field of skeletons rose as one and began slashing at the Khadorans.

"We are under attack!" shouted Marshal Berman as a dozen skeleton warriors surged towards his point position. "Keep sounding the retreat so that the other clans will hear it," he yelled to the hornsman.

Marshal Berman drew his sword and slashed at the skeletons trying to encircle him, but there was nothing to sink his blade into. There were no screams from the victims of his swings, and his steel neither sank into flesh, nor caused blood to flow onto the barren soil.

The Balomar marshal's eyes flicked in every direction as he parried blows from the swords of the dead. He saw thousands of skeletons racing towards the still advancing line of Khadorans, and he caught sight of Lord Marshal Stanton trying his best to keep Lord Faliman safe so that he could retreat. Berman cursed as he realized that all was lost for the vanguard. He wheeled his horse and raced towards the hornsman.

"Stanton," shouted Marshal Berman, "leave Faliman and rally to the hornsman. We must stop the Khadoran advance."

"I cannot leave my lord," refused the lord marshal.

"Your lord is dead," snapped Berman as he raced past. "We are all dead. Make our lives worth something. We must protect the hornsman as long as we can."

Marshal Berman reached the retreating hornsman and took up his right flank. Ahead of him he saw the army of skeletons closing off the path of retreat.

"Blow, son," encouraged the Balomar marshal. "Blow as long and as hard as you can. Give your countrymen a chance to live."

Lord Marshal Stanton pulled up on the hornsman's left flank and began slicing into the skeletons. Berman saw Lord Faliman race by, but the path was already blocked. All around the hornsman, Aritor soldiers cried out in pain as they toppled from their horses. Berman swung his blade hard, and his victims' bones cracked in response, but the dead warriors did not fall. The skeletons continued attacking, switching the hands that wielded their weapons if they needed to.

"I got one to fall," Stanton shouted in triumph.

"How?" yelled Berman as the hornsman continued to blare the retreat.

"Break their necks," shouted Stanton.

Marshal Berman nodded in understanding and extended his reach on the next swing. His sword slammed into a skeleton's neck and its head lopped off. The skeleton collapsed in a pile of bones, but the swing cost Berman dearly. Two swords sliced into his leg, and he yelped in pain as blood gushed out of his wounds. Marshal Berman gritted his teeth and struck out again. He scored another blow to the neck of a skeleton and watched the bones fall to the ground, but his joy was short-lived. He watched in amazement as his hand and sword fell to the ground. For a moment he felt no pain from his severed hand, as if it was all a dream, but reality returned all too soon. Blood spewed from the stump of his arm, and he closed his eyes for a final prayer to Kaltara. Seconds later the marshal's body was struck in several places at once. He tumbled from his horse, and his world grew black.

* * *

Emperor Marak was in the forest south of Lake Jabul. He stood with Lyra, Ukaro, King Avalar, and Princess Alastasia. As the sun broke the horizon he could just make out the long line of Khadorans advancing eastward.

"So it begins," he said softly.

"Should we be advancing as well?" asked Princess Alastasia.

"No," the Torak shook his head. "The Khadoran army is enough of a threat to make Vand show his hand. Let's wait and see what surprises he has in store for us."

"What is out there?" Lyra asked with a puzzled expression. "Thousands of flickers are reflecting the sun."

"I see that, too," nodded King Avalar. "Something is out there."

The Torak's eyes narrowed as he stared at the thousands of tiny

flashes. It was as if the entire ground was littered with pieces of metal. The reflections appeared on both sides of the lake and stretched out far to both the east and the west. The only area that did not have any reflections was right around the distant temple.

"I have to go look," declared the Torak.

"On Myka?" asked the Star of Sakova. "I thought you said you would not be riding her into battle?"

"I must know what is out there," replied Marak. "There is nothing natural about those reflections. They are Vand's surprise."

The Torak turned and ran through the woods to the clearing where Myka rested. He raced right up onto her back with impatience.

"Going somewhere?" quipped the dragon.

"I have no time for humor," replied the Torak. "Get me over the battlefield quickly. Something is wrong."

Myka wasted no words in reply. She rose up and leaped into the sky.

"Head towards the Khadorans," instructed Marak, "but keep low enough for me to see what we are traveling over."

Myka skimmed over the trees of the forest and was soon flying over the baked soil of the wasteland. Marak looked down with a puzzled expression on his face. Thousands of skeletons littered the ground and it soon became obvious that the sun was reflecting off the swords that they held.

"An old battlefield?" questioned the dragon.

"I don't think so," mused the Torak. "Do you see any of the bones crushed? Each skeleton is fully formed. How could anyone ride or march to Vandegar without crushing some of the bones?"

"Maybe no one has ever approached the temple from this direction?" posed the dragon.

"Possible," admitted the Torak, "but I will not accept that just yet. We have been expecting some surprise from Vand, and this is surprising."

"We will know soon enough," declared the dragon. "Your Khadorans are about to start crunching bones."

Marak strained his eyes trying to see the progress of the Khadoran clansmen, but they were still too far away to make out the details. His eyes drifted downward and scanned the skeleton bodies.

"Did you hear that?" asked Myka.

"Hear what?" asked Emperor Marak.

"A horn," answered the dragon. "It came from the Khadorans."

Suddenly, the skeletons below came to life and rose to their feet, their bony hands brandishing swords.

"Mercy!" swore the Torak. "There are thousands upon thousands of them."

“And not enough flesh on all of them put together for even a decent snack,” the dragon said dryly.

Marak dragged his eyes away from the skeletons below and focused on the blur of Khadorans in the distance.

“What can you see?” he asked the dragon as they sped across the wasteland.

“The vanguard is being encircled,” Myka reported. “The rest of the Khadorans are still moving forward as if unaware of the danger, but the horn is still blowing.”

“I can hear it now,” nodded Marak.

“The blue and green ones are falling from their horses,” the dragon continued. “They have turned around to flee, but there is nowhere for them to go.”

“Is Marshal Berman with them?” asked Marak.

“There is one in orange and yellow among them,” replied the dragon. “He fights valiantly, but his blows are wasted. The creatures do not fall down when struck.”

Emperor Marak turned his head to survey the rest of the area around the temple. He saw a large mass of red uniforms around the temple, but they were making no move to join the battle. Suddenly, swift movement caught his eye near the roof of the temple. He squinted into the rising sun and saw a large black shape leap off the roof. Its wings spread out, and it flapped hard as it headed straight towards Marak and Myka.

“We have a visitor coming,” the Torak said nervously. “I think it might be a demon.”

Flames shot out of the dragon’s mouth as her head turned towards the temple.

“Barrok,” spat the dragon. “Use your knife, Torak. This will be the type of ride you never wished for.”

“Perhaps you should put me down?” questioned the Torak. “I do not want to hinder your fighting.”

“I wish there was time to do just that,” replied Myka, “but there is not. I cannot afford to let the demon get above me. I would also lose too much speed by letting you off. Use your knife and hang on.”

Emperor Marak shoved his knife into the scale of the dragon. He wedged it in strong and gripped it with both hands. As Myka turned to face the approaching demon, Marak’s eyes returned to the battle below. They had covered enough ground so that Marak was now able to see clearly. What he saw was disturbing.

The Khadoran Emperor watched as Marshal Berman fell to the ground, his body cut and bleeding. The hornsman was the next to go, but the most interesting sight was that of Lord Marshal Stanton breaking the neck of one of the skeletons. The creature immediately

crumpled into a pile of bones and did not get up again. He also saw Lord Faliman sliced open and realized that none of the vanguard would live. He hastily wove an air tunnel to the Khadoran mages behind the line of horsemen.

"You need to hang onto your knife," warned the dragon. "I will not be able to stop you from falling."

"In a minute," replied the Torak.

An air mage picked up his air tunnel, and the Torak wasted no words.

"Tell Lord Marshal Yenga to assume command of the army," ordered the Emperor. "Tell everyone that the creatures need to be decapitated. Order the cavalry to fall back and use the mages to blast the skeletons in any way they can to aid in the retreat."

"Retreat?" asked the air mage.

"Yes," snapped the Torak. "Get our people away from the skeletons. Notify King Avalar about everything I have said and try to contact the Fakarans."

"Using air tunnels?" questioned the mage.

"The time for secrecy is over," replied the Torak. "Vand knows that we have arrived. Our forces need to coordinate."

"The knife, Torak!" shouted Myka. "Now!"

Marak dropped the air tunnel and quickly grabbed the knife. He looked up to see the grotesque creature streaking towards them. Its fangs were bared and long, sharp talons were stretched out before it. The two powerful creatures were on a collision course at a speed that the Torak could only imagine. He gripped the knife firmly with both hands and waited for the crash that was to come.

Suddenly, Myka rolled to one side, her claws reaching out to rake the side of the passing demon. Marak gripped the knife harder than he had ever gripped anything in his life, and his legs tried to press against the sides of the dragon to avoid being sent to his death below. The demon screamed as it passed, and one of its wings came perilously close to Marak.

"First blood," Myka said with satisfaction as she leveled out and swept into a sharp bank to the left.

Marak felt his body tossed about like the ear of a romping dog. He gripped the knife anew and adjusted his legs as the dragon straightened and headed towards the distant demon that had also turned around. Once again the two huge creatures raced towards one another, and once again it appeared that a collision was imminent.

Unexpectedly, the demon's wings flared out to each side and the demon dropped rapidly. Myka screamed as she flew over the demon, as Barrok gashed her underside with its sharp claws. The dragon did not turn as quickly as the last time, but sped on straight for some

time. Marak turned his head and saw the demon approaching from behind.

"It's coming up behind you," warned the Torak.

"I know," answered the dragon. "You must hang on tightly just before Barrok reaches me. You will be jarred abruptly."

Marak kept watching the approaching demon until it was too close to see without letting go of the knife. Unexpectedly, Myka's entire body thrashed as her powerful tail whipped full out and smashed the demon in the face. The demon reacted as if it had run into a wall. Its wings flapped furiously and Barrok dropped a hundred paces in altitude. Myka had already begun her dive and spiraled around to attack the demon before it recovered. Her claws dug into the demon's face, but Barrok was not defeated yet. The demon spun its body, and its talons tore into Myka's left wing. The dragon broke off, large tears shredding a section of her wing. She immediately rose higher in the sky to put distance between the demon and herself.

"Can you win this fight?" asked the Torak. "This demon seems to be a formidable foe."

"I must," replied Myka. "This is only the first of six, and those six are the survivors of the last battle. They are all skilled and deadly. Thankfully they are attacking one at a time, or I would have no chance at all. Hold on tight, Torak, we are going in for the kill this time."

Marak was not sure if Myka could kill the demon. The lacerations in her wing surely had to affect her ability to maneuver quickly, and the Torak could see no weakness in the demon.

Myka wobbled as she flew, and the demon cackled as it circled. On one pass the demon spit at Myka, and a large glob of acidic spittle landed near Marak. The glob smoked as it started to eat through one of Myka's scales. Marak's hand darted to his pack to retrieve a piece of cloth to blot the sputum, but Myka spoke sharply.

"Mind your knife, Torak," ordered the dragon.

"Wise, Myka," cackled Barrok. "There is no need to worry about scales when you both shall be dead soon."

Marak's hands immediately gripped the knife tightly. The demon darted inward towards Myka's injured wing from the rear. Myka suddenly folded her wings inward and began to drop precipitously. The demon shouted in surprise and streaked after the falling dragon. The Torak's body lifted off the dragon's back, and he remained affixed only by his hands holding the knife. Without warning, Myka's wings suddenly flared outward, and Marak's body slammed into the dragon's scales. The demon had been tricked into believing that Myka was heading for the ground. As the demon instantly caught up to the dragon, Myka twisted in the air and snapped her jaws tight on

Barrok's throat. The demon gagged and flailed as it tried to break free, but the dragon increased the pressure as her teeth sunk ever deeper. Acidic, black blood seeped out of the demon's neck and flowed along its body. With a loud snap, the demon's head lolled to one side. Myka flipped her head and discarded the creature's body. Marak watched the demon's carcass fall to the ground.

"You did it!" exclaimed the Torak.

"This is no time for congratulations," sighed Myka. "Agad and Caliphia are coming out to play."

The Torak glanced towards the temple and saw two distant black shapes winging away from the building's roof.

* * *

"Have them blunt their arrows," shouted King Avalar. "I want them to hit solidly when they are fired. There will be no flesh to bite into. The task is to break the spinal column supporting the head."

"I will see to it," promised Galantor.

The elven king returned his attention to the duel in the sky in time to see the demon gore the underside of the dragon.

"That doesn't look good," commented Ukaro. "Isn't there anything that we can do to help?"

"Not according to Myka," Lyra shook her head. "The demons are immune to magic, and our weapons are puny in comparison to the armor of their hides."

"Emperor Marak is being tossed around dangerously," frowned Princess Alastasia. "If Myka dies, so does the Torak. How can he manage to hang on?"

"His life depends upon hanging on," Ukaro said softly.

StarWind came running towards the group and halted alongside Lyra.

"We have contacted the Astor," she reported. "We were just in time. The free tribes were just about to advance into the field of skeletons. They have halted and are awaiting instructions."

"They will have to wait a bit," Lyra said distractedly. "I don't know how to continue without the Torak."

"We must continue," balked King Avalar. "We are all committed to destroying Vand. There is no other option for us. He will destroy our world. Surely the Star and the Astor will carry on?"

"I understand the position that we are in," Lyra retorted tensely. "What I meant by my words is that the prophecies clearly state that the Three will battle Vand for control of the world. If the Torak dies, the Three are no longer. I do not know if just the Astor and I can fulfill the prophecy."

"I will not accept that," Princess Alastasia declared. "Everyone here will fight to the death to destroy Vand. I do not care what the

prophecies state. We are all committed to this campaign, and we shall finish it, one way or another."

"Well spoken, daughter," smiled King Avalar.

"I would have it no other way," explained Lyra. "I have no intention of backing out. I just want everyone to realize that our fight may be futile. That is not to say that we would even think of abandoning it."

"A tail to the face!" exclaimed Ukaro. "Myka is going in for the kill."

Everyone's attention returned to the battle overhead as Myka's claws ripped into the demon's face and then the demon shredded the dragon's wing.

"This is not going well," StarWind remarked with nervousness. "Can't we do something? I would rather attack than stand here watching helplessly."

"Myka does look wounded," sighed King Avalar, "but I would never give up on a winged warrior. They have the spirit of Kaltara abiding within them."

"Within her," corrected the Star of Sakova. "Myka is the last of her kind."

The group watched as the demon circled the wounded dragon. Breaths were held and the camp fell silent as the demon spiraled closer and closer.

"She's falling," gasped Lyra. "Oh, Kaltara, save her."

The demon dove after the falling dragon, and everyone held their breath again. When Myka flared her wings and struck the demon in the neck, the whole crowd cheered loudly. They watched with satisfaction as the demon's body plummeted to the ground.

"I thought Marak would fall off when Myka began dropping," Lyra sighed with relief. "He was barely hanging on, and a fall from such a height would surely have killed him."

"Praise Kaltara that that is over with," exhaled Ukaro.

"Praise him indeed," King Avalar said softly, "but it is not over. Look towards the temple."

The group gazed towards the towering Temple of Vandegar and saw the two black specks flying towards the dragon.

"She is in no condition to fight right now," frowned Ukaro. "She must flee to fight another day."

"She is trying to flee to the east," remarked StarWind, "but her flying is erratic. I don't think she will be able to elude them."

The demons saw the dragon's intended path and moved to intercept her. The two demons separated in altitude as they approached Myka, and everyone knew that the fight would commence soon. There was no way for Myka to escape. As everyone watched in

horrified silence, the demons angled to get the dragon between them so that they could both attack at once. Myka tried frantically to outmaneuver the demons by twisting and turning and reversing course, but it was not to be. Another battle in the sky was about to begin, and this one was not a match of equals.

A sudden communal gasp ripped through the forest as Emperor's Marak's body separated from the back of the dragon and plummeted towards the ground. No sooner had he fallen than the demons swept in to strike the dragon and deal a deathblow to their mighty foe.

Chapter 43

Close Friends

As the group watched Emperor Marak fall from the dragon, the Star of Sakova dropped to her knees in prayer. Absolute silence reigned for several seconds and then wild cheers erupted from the group. Lyra rose swiftly and tried to see why they were cheering.

"Tell me," pleaded Lyra. "What happened to Marak?"

"Weren't you watching?" replied Princess Alastasia. "He landed in the lake."

"Is he alive?" Lyra asked.

"We can't tell from here," King Avalar said softly, "but there is hope for him now. Had he landed on the ground he would have surely died."

"We must go to him," declared the Star of Sakova. "StarWind, get everyone ready."

"There are thousands of creatures between us and the lake," warned StarWind. "We may not survive the journey."

"We would have to go there and then bring Emperor Marak back here," added Princess Alastasia. "We cannot possibly defend him at the side of the lake, and those creatures are sure to pursue us."

"I don't want excuses or warnings," screamed Lyra. "Get the chokas ready now. The Sakovans are going to get Marak and bring him to safety."

StarWind backed away from Lyra, her eyes wide with surprise. While Lyra often had emotional outbursts, she had never screamed in fury before. The Star of Sakova's face was scarlet and her eyes were piercing. StarWind swallowed and nodded silently before she raced into the campsite and called for the Sakovans to mount up for battle. Ukaro stepped next to the Star of Sakova and placed his arm around her comfortingly.

"The Sakovans are only five hundred strong," he said softly.

Lyra turned, pushing his arm away as she glared at the Chula shaman. Her mouth opened wide to deliver a verbal tirade, but Ukaro smiled and placed a finger on her lips.

"Here my words," Ukaro pleaded. "I am not saying that you should not go, but I want you to realize the seriousness of what we are going to do."

"We?" frowned Lyra.

"Marak is my son and the pride of the Chula people," smiled

Ukaro. “Did you actually think that we would abandon him? I do not know how much help the Chula will be, but we will run with you.”

“In cat form?” asked King Avalar.

“It would be the only way that we could keep up with the chokas,” nodded Ukaro. “That is why I said we may not be of much help against the creatures. We can run or fight, but doing both at the same time is not very effective.”

“Would your people accept riders?” asked Princess Alastasia.

Ukaro smiled broadly. “Elven archers perhaps?” he asked.

“That is what I was thinking,” nodded King Avalar. “Marak is our Torak as well. We have not come all the way from Elvangar to see him die at the hands of these creatures.”

“With pleasure,” Ukaro nodded vigorously. “We can only carry five hundred archers. The rest of my people are not shamans and cannot perform the transformation.”

“Then this is what I propose,” explained King Avalar. “We place the elven archers astride the Chula in the center of the procession. The Sakovans will take the vanguard and the outside flanks. They can hack at the creatures as we shoot our arrows over the Sakovan heads. I will have the archers that remain behind in the forest start to open up a corridor for our return trip.”

“That will work,” trembled Lyra, “but we are running out of time. He will be alone and surrounded by those skeletons. We must hurry.”

Ukaro and King Avalar shouted orders and the entire campsite swept into action. The scene was hectic as the groups quickly assembled. While it only took several minutes for the groups to prepare, it felt like hours for Lyra. She paced furiously back and forth until Goral brought her a choka.

“I will be the tip of the spear,” he told the Star of Sakova. “Do not under any circumstances pass me. If I fall to the creatures, others will take my place, but you must promise to let your people precede you.”

Lyra nodded impatiently as HawkShadow, StarWind, and StormSong got in position directly behind Goral. The rest of the Sakovans moved to one side or the other as elf-bearing cheetahs lined up behind the Star of Sakova. Goral turned and gazed at the formation before holding up his hand as high as it would reach. With a slight intake of breath, the Sakovan giant brought his arm down swiftly and urged his choka forward.

The odd assortment of fighters broke out of the forest and raced across the barren plain towards the south end of the lake. At first the skeletons did not notice the attack from the south, but when they did, they surged to block their path.

Goral had been chosen for the point position because of the long reach of his maul. When the Sakovans reached the wall of skeletons,

Goral started swinging his maul continuously back and forth. He kept the devastating weapon at a level consistent with the heads of the skeletons, and disconnected skulls started flying through the air. StormSong and HawkShadow rode side-by-side just behind Goral, and they extended the swath of destruction on each side of the procession. StarWind rode directly in front of Lyra. It was her task to kill anything that got past her comrades. The rest of the Sakovans formed the outside lines of a giant wedge that sliced its way through the crowd of creatures.

Behind the Star of Sakova, and in between the two lines of Sakovans, five hundred elven archers rode on cheetahs and fired blunt arrows at the necks of skeletons. Their task was to limit the number of creatures that would succeed in approaching the column, as the Sakovans could only kill so many. At first the elven archers were only mildly successful, as they were not used to the lope of a cheetah, but they adapted quickly.

Lyra felt helpless as the column raced towards the lake. The flow of skeletons appeared to be endless, and all she could see was a sea of endless white heads. In frustration, the Star of Sakova gazed skyward and gasped. She had forgotten about the battle going on in the sky. When she looked up there was only one demon fighting Myka, but the dragon was dripping blood at a rapid rate. Streams of dragon blood appeared to be flowing freely towards the ground, and Myka's flying appeared very erratic and slow. The remaining demon still appeared agile, and Lyra could see no injuries. As Lyra watched, the demon made its move. It soared past the dragon and abruptly turned. Sinking its talons into Myka's back, the demon sunk its teeth into the dragon's neck.

Lyra could hear the dragon's scream above the thunder of smashing skeletons going on around her. Myka's tail suddenly whipped forward and wrapped around the demon's body. As the demon turned to slash the tail in half, Myka's head swiveled quickly. Her jaws wrapped around the demon's neck and her teeth dug in deeply. The demon howled, and the unnatural cry roared across the plain. Both demon and dragon stopped flapping their wings and tumbled to the ground. The Star of Sakova thought she felt the ground shake as the two behemoths impacted the ground, and tears started flowing down Lyra's cheeks. She closed her eyes and prayed that Kaltara would accept his valiant warrior and give her a special place by his side.

Unexpectedly, Lyra's choka slashed out at something and leaped into the air. Lyra opened her eyes to see what was happening.

"Keep alert," yelled StarWind. "We do not want to lose you."

"What was that?" Lyra asked.

“A skeleton tried to rise in front of you,” replied the Sakovan spymaster.

“Goral missed one?” frowned Lyra.

“He has missed quite a few actually,” StarWind answered. “We have been running over skeletons since the fighting began. It is impossible to get them all, but I think they are starting to get wise. I think that one intentionally laid down so it could rise in our midst.”

“I will stay alert,” promised Lyra. “I was distracted watching Myka die. It won’t happen again.”

StarWind frowned as her eyes shot skyward for an instant. She shook her head sadly and returned her attention to the fight ahead of her.

“Sakovans,” shouted Goral, “prepare to form a perimeter. The lake is at hand.”

The order was quickly spread back through the column, and the Sakovans began to push outward as Goral slowed the pace. The column bunched up and resembled a horseshoe with the flat end against the lakeshore. The creatures continued attacking as Lyra leaped off her choka and ran to the water’s edge.

“He sees us,” pointed HawkShadow. “He is swimming towards us.”

“Our Torak was wise to remain far out in the lake until someone came to assist him,” smiled StarWind.

“I wish I had thought to tell him we were coming,” Lyra berated herself as her eyes turned and looked at the fighting going on behind her. “My people are dying back there.”

“I don’t think we will get back to the forest so easily,” frowned StormSong. “Look at them massing between us and the woods. We will have to fight through at least four times as many skeletons.”

As Lyra turned and watched the fighting, her heart sank and tears came to her eyes. The elven archers were firing as fast as they could and still great hordes of creatures were approaching the Sakovan warriors. The chokas were constantly slashing out with their fore claws, but their efforts were in vain. They could easily kill by slashing an opponent’s skin and puncturing organs, but there was nothing to pierce on the skeletons. The Sakovan warriors were constantly swinging at the creatures’ necks, but Lyra knew that they could only keep it up for so long. Unlike the skeletons, humans tired after a while. Lyra started crying loudly.

“Marak would have lived if I had not brought everyone out here,” bawled Lyra, “but now everyone will die.”

StarWind stepped in front of the Star of Sakova and placed her hands on Lyra’s shoulders. She shook Lyra harshly and spoke softly, but firmly.

“Calm yourself,” ordered StarWind. “You are supposed to bring your people hope, not despair. Do not let your people hear you talking like that.”

“But it is true,” Lyra whimpered. “I have failed you all.”

“Nothing is true until it is over,” retorted the Sakovan spymaster. “You will continue to have hope until you stop breathing. You will bring hope to your people. They need your optimism right now to live. Don’t take their will away from them even if it is hopeless. Do you understand?”

Lyra nodded as she tried to dry her tears. StarWind stood directly in front of the Star of Sakova so that no one could see her face. She waited for Lyra to calm down.

* * *

Rejji sat in the middle of the Jiadin tribe. The red-scarfed horsemen stretched away to both sides of him as they sat in a long line staring across the plain at the mass of skeletons. Far off to the Astor’s right, the free tribes were also lined up. The line of horsemen stretched for leagues, but everyone’s attention was on the battle in the sky. High over the plain, the dragon and her rider battled the demon.

“Who is riding the dragon?” asked Harmagan. “I thought only the king could ride one?”

“That is Emperor Marak of Khadora,” answered Rejji. “He is also known as the Torak.”

“And you let him ride your dragon?” asked Jaker. “How can he do it? You are supposed to be the only one.”

“Marak is a special man,” smiled Rejji. “Besides, it is not my place to allow anyone to ride a dragon. It is the dragon that allows it. The Torak is probably the most capable fighter in the world.”

“Is he the one who defeated the Jiadin in Khadora?” asked Niger.

“He is,” nodded Rejji.

“Then curse him,” spat Niger. “I hope he falls off.”

Rejji’s hands moved faster than he had ever felt them move before. His staff flew outward and pressed tightly against Niger’s throat, and the Astor’s eyes turned to ice as he glared at the Jiadin.

“I would sooner die myself than to see Marak fail,” spat Rejji. “You will apologize for your words.”

“I am sorry,” Niger uttered softly as his eyes filled with fear. “I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“Don’t be harsh with Niger,” pleaded Harmagan. “He doesn’t understand, but I can explain it to him.”

Rejji withdrew his staff and, after a final glare at Niger, returned his attention to the battle in the sky.

“The fact that this Marak defeated the Jiadin in Khadora is a testament to his skills,” Harmagan said to Niger. “The Jiadin have

always admired the skills of great warriors, and this Marak appears to be the greatest of all. I know men who were at the battle of Balomar. It was a tiny estate and should have been easy pickings, but Marak turned back twenty thousand of our men with a vastly inferior force. Do not wish him harm. If anything, I would love to meet him, and not on the battlefield, if you know what I mean."

"I am sorry," Niger repeated. "It was a dumb thing to say. I truly am sorry."

"The dragon won!" shouted Jaker. "Hah, those demons don't look so tough now."

"It looked like a tough fight to me," remarked Bakhai. "Myka's wing is damaged. I would say that they were pretty evenly matched."

"Then trouble is on the way," pointed Harmagan. "Two more of the creatures are coming out to play."

"Two?" gasped Rejji. "This is not good. How many of them are there, Scarab?"

"Six altogether," answered the Khadoran spy. "I heard the other three are looking for Angragar, but they might even be back by now. I do not know for sure."

"Marak has fallen!" shouted Wyant.

Everyone focused on the Emperor of Khadora as his body tumbled down and fell into the lake.

"Did he survive?" asked Rejji.

"I can't tell from here," answered Wyant, "but if he did, he has a long swim to shore. He went down somewhere near the middle of the lake."

"What will he do?" Bakhai asked his brother.

"I am not sure," answered Rejji. "I know he swims well. We spent some time swimming in the surf when he came to Ghala."

"But the lake is surrounded by those creatures," Harmagan pointed out. "He can't go to shore, and he can't swim forever."

"Try reaching him with an air tunnel, Bakhai," ordered the Astor.

The shaman spent several minutes probing the surface of the lake with an air tunnel, but he received no response.

"Look towards the woods south of the lake," Jaker said urgently. "Something is going on down there."

"Chokas," remarked Bakhai. "Remember the warbirds we saw in Fardale? Those are Sakovan chokas. Nothing else looks like them."

"They are making a run for the lake," commented Harmagan. "They have guts, but they will never make it."

"Why not?" asked Niger.

"Look at their column," answered Harmagan. "There can't be more than a thousand of them, fifteen hundred tops. There has to be thirty to fifty thousand skeletons between them and the lake, and

what are they going to do when they get there? They are going to have to turn around and run away from the creatures. That is what they are going to have to do. They don't stand a chance."

"They are obviously trying to rescue Emperor Marak," stated Wyant. "They must know that he is still alive. We must do something to help them."

"Us?" balked Niger. "You can't be serious? How do you kill something that is already dead? We'll be cut to pieces."

"You separate their heads from their bodies," answered Bakhai. "At least that is what we have been told."

"Easier said than done," scowled Niger.

"Well," Rejji smiled fatalistically, "I guess the Sakovans are tougher fighters than Fakarans, or at least some Fakarans."

The three Jiadin frowned, but Rejji continued speaking.

"Wyant," ordered the Astor, "I want you to join up with Yltar and the free tribes. They are to hold in position until ordered to move."

"As you wish," nodded Wyant. "Will you be here if we need direction?"

"No," the Astor shook his head. "I will be at the south end of the lake providing cover for the Sakovans so they can retreat with Emperor Marak."

"You can't be serious?" balked Niger. "You will surely die."

"We might," shrugged Bakhai as he rode forward and halted alongside his brother, "but we will have died in glorious battle, not sitting in the sun baking to death like old women."

Harmagan laughed so hard that he doubled over in his saddle. Jaker and Niger looked at their leader with puzzlement.

"What is so funny?" asked Jaker.

"I think Rejji already knew that the Jiadin would ride with him into battle," chuckled Harmagan, "but his little brother's words left no chance of our refusal. You are a wily one, Bakhai."

Bakhai blushed slightly and Rejji grinned broadly.

"Jiadin," shouted Harmagan, "prepare for battle."

Tens of thousands of red-scarfed warriors shouted battle cries and raised their swords high. The outcast horsemen formed ranks and prepared to charge into the midst of the mass of skeleton creatures.

"Scarab," Harmagan said softly to the Khadoran spy, "you keep close to Rejji and his brother. Let nothing harm them. I am counting on you."

"Thank you," smiled Harmagan's supposed little brother.

Harmagan nodded and smiled as he raised his sword high.

"Jiadin," he bellowed, "Charge!"

The plains of Vandegar rumbled as over a hundred thousand hooves slammed into the dust. Harmagan took the point and led his

people towards the lake. Great billows of dust rose skyward as the Jiadin swept towards the skeletons. If the skeleton creatures had been capable of knowing fear, they would have fled immediately. Instead they turned to meet the stampeding horde of Jiadin.

Harmagan kept part of his attention on the progress that the Sakovans were making. When he saw that they had reached the south shore of the lake, he altered course so that the Jiadin would bisect the mass of skeletons between the lake and the forest. The move threw the skeletons off stride. Those that were preparing to meet the Jiadin charge suddenly had no opponents to fight, and those who were bearing down on the Sakovans had to turn and fight a new threat. The tactic could not have worked better.

* * *

The Torak reached up and grasped Goral's hand. The giant easily lifted the Emperor clear of the lake and set him down on the ground.

"StarWind," ordered Lyra, "find Marak a choka."

StarWind dashed away, and Lyra approached Marak and wrapped her arms around him.

"I thought you had died," Lyra said softly.

"Impossible," grinned Marak, "I have not had a chance to fight yet. How are we getting out of here?"

"We thought we weren't," replied King Avalar, "but you have more friends than anyone I know. Fakaran horsemen are charging into the skeletons between here and the forest to the south. I have archers trying to open a corridor from the forest northward. We will have to fight our way out, but at least we have a fighting chance now."

"Then let us fight," the Torak said loudly as he broke Lyra's embrace and accepted a choka from StarWind.

Marak felt ten pounds heavier with his wet clothes, but the choka did not seem to mind. He urged the warbird through the center of the elven-bearing cheetahs and prepared to take the point of the return trip to the forest. Goral, HawkShadow, and StormSong edged in front of him.

"This is not a Khadoran mission," grinned Goral. "We will ride point this trip. You get the leftovers."

The Torak nodded good-naturedly, and Goral started the push forward. The Sakovans had no momentum as they had had on the dash to the lake, and getting started was rough. The column inched forward and casualties began to mount as Sakovan warriors fell to the ground and their chokas tried to continue fighting.

"Archers concentrate forward," shouted King Avalar. "We need to pick up the pace."

The elven archers instantly obeyed and hundreds of arrows streaked past Goral. By the third volley, Goral was able to get some

speed out of his choka, and the column began moving at a decent pace. The elven archers continued to concentrate on the masses before the column at the expense of the flanks. This allowed the column to gain speed, but the flanks were being destroyed. Emperor Marak saw a hole in the flank and quickly moved to fill it. He drew the Sword of Torak and began slashing into the skeletons as quickly as he could.

Once the column was moving swiftly, the elven archers returned their attention to the flanks, and the Sakovan losses ended. Before they were a third of the way to the forest, Jiadin riders surrounded the entire column. Half way to the forest, two long lines of elven archers created a safe corridor for the column to pass through. The Jiadin enveloped the lines of elven archers allowing them to join the column and return to the forest. By the time they were three-fourths of the way to the forest, the skeletons gave up the chase. Everyone moved into the shade of the forest and began to take stock of their losses.

Lyra rushed over to Marak as soon as they were safely beneath the trees. She hugged him tightly and kissed him.

"You had me worried," she said softly. "Don't ever do that again."

"I won't," promised Marak. "I doubt that Myka will ever let me ride her again. I was a hindrance to her fighting. Where is she?" he asked as he tried to peer through the canopy.

"She died," Lyra said cautiously. "She went down with the third demon."

Lyra could feel Marak's body grow suddenly rigid. His expression turned cold with hatred, and he broke the embrace. Without a word, the Torak turned and marched out of the forest. Lyra ran after him, afraid that he was going to do something foolish, but she halted at the edge of the trees when she saw that he was not storming off. The Torak was on his knees with his head bowed to the soil. His fists were clenched in tight balls, and the Star of Sakova knew that what was dripping onto the parched soil was not water from the Torak's clothes, but tears for his lost winged warrior.

Chapter 44

The Burial

The mood in the forest south of Lake Jabul was somber. Mages tended to the wounded, while unit leaders counted the number of fighters missing. The losses were great, especially among the Jiadin who had carved a wide path through the skeleton creatures. Warriors gathered in small clumps to discuss the fighting and tell of their narrow escapes from death, or to console those who had lost someone close. Lyra sat silently by the fire thinking of Marak, while StarWind, King Avalar, Princess Alastasia and Ukaro stood nearby discussing tactics. Harmagan, Jaker, and Niger approached the group to talk.

"You Jiadin did an excellent job out there," complimented King Avalar. "I doubt we would have made it back to the forest without your help."

"The fact that you were out of the forest speaks highly of your courage," Harmagan returned the compliment. "How could the Jiadin not honor such devotion to the Torak?"

"Well spoken big brother," smiled Scarab as he, Rejji, and Bakhai approached. "One would almost think you actually knew who the Torak was?"

"I do not understand what the term means," Harmagan admitted sheepishly, "but I do understand this much about men. Any man that could garner such favor from so many people is an amazing man, and one worthy to be associated with. I know of him as Emperor Marak of Khadora, and what I heard of him causes awe and inspiration. Others speak of him as the Torak, as if he were a deity. Whatever he is called, I long to serve such a man."

"He is not a deity," explained King Avalar, "but he speaks to one. The Torak is an ancient name, and it stands for one who serves God, but he is not alone in this endeavor. The Star of Sakova and the Astor, who you call King Rejji, are partners. They are the Three that serve Kaltara. To serve one is to serve them all."

Harmagan turned and stared at Rejji as if he had never seen him before.

"Is this true?" asked Harmagan. "Do you speak with God?"

"It is true," nodded the Astor.

"Now I understand," smiled Harmagan. "That is why Marak could ride the dragon as well as you, isn't it?"

"Myka was an ancient creature of Kaltara's will," replied Rejji,

“and yes, that is why she allowed him to ride upon her.”

“It all begins to make sense now,” the Jiadin leader nodded thoughtfully. “There is only one other question that has been bothering me.”

“And what is that?” asked Rejji.

“I saw the elves riding large cats across the battlefield,” Harmagan asked, “but I have not been able to find them in the forest. Where do you keep them?”

“You do not have to fear the cats,” Ukaro smiled, his eyes shining with humor and his mane swaying in laughter. “They will not harm you.”

“That is good to know,” Niger said nervously, “but just in case, where are they?”

“Around,” purred Ukaro. “They are all around us.”

Lyra suddenly stood and stared into the forest. Everyone noticed and followed her gaze to see Emperor Marak walking in from the plains. Lyra eased her way out of the crowd and went to greet him.

“I was wondering where he had gone,” commented Harmagan. “I must talk to him.”

Scarab’s hand shot out and rested on Harmagan’s chest.

“Not right now,” the Khadoran spy said softly. “Let him talk with Lyra. I will introduce you to him later.”

Harmagan looked at Scarab bewildered, but he nodded as he began to understand that there was something special between the Torak and the Star of Sakova.

Marak halted just inside the line of trees and let Lyra come to him. She walked up to him and silently embraced him. For several long moments, neither of them spoke. Finally, Marak kissed Lyra and held her in front of him at arm’s length.

“For two people supposedly guided by God,” Marak said softly, “we are not doing too well.”

“What do you mean?” asked Lyra.

“Did you try magic on the skeletons?” he asked.

“We were told that only a strike to the neck would kill them,” frowned Lyra. “Didn’t that come from you?”

“Not from me,” Marak shook his head. “I did not try magic on the ride from the lake because I thought you would be using it if it worked. I swung my sword like everyone else.”

“So I failed again?” Lyra sniffed, feeling rebuked at the very moment that she wanted to just hug Marak and feel the life inside him. “I was in a hurry to save your life.”

“I am not chastising you, Lyra,” smiled Marak. “I made a more serious error than you. All that I am trying to say is that we must not let the words of others determine our actions. You let the words of

some swordsmen endanger your people. Kaltara chose us because we have the skills necessary to complete this task. We must slow down and think about how we are to use those skills before we act."

"You might have drowned," protested Lyra. "Or even worse, the skeletons could have gotten you. We had to move quickly. You don't seem to be very grateful for our actions."

"I am very grateful," sighed Marak, "but you are taking my words the wrong way."

"I have never seen you this negative before, Marak," frowned Lyra. "I have never seen this side of you, and I don't like it. Just what is bothering you? Is it Myka's death? We have all lost loved ones in these wars. It is fine to grieve, but you are well past that point. You are downright bitter."

"I suppose I am," Marak said softly as his eyes dropped towards the ground.

"You said that you also made a serious error," Lyra continued. "Is that what is bothering you?"

"I guess so," nodded Marak. "So many have died because of my actions today. It is easy to point out how you rushed into battle without a plan and relied on anonymous words pertaining to tactics, but the fact is that I did exactly the same, except I did it worse."

"What do you mean?" questioned the Star of Sakova.

"I should not have been on Myka today," stated the Torak, "but I had to rush to find out what was going on. Once there, I did nothing to help the dragon. In fact, I was a burden to her. I realized that after the first battle ended, which is why I jumped off."

"You jumped off?" Lyra echoed in surprise.

"I jumped off," Marak repeated. "She was over the lake, and I thought my odds of surviving were very good. I knew she could not fight two demons with me on her back, and she would never endanger my life to survive. I did what I thought was the smartest thing to do. I jumped in the lake."

"I understand," Lyra said consolingly.

"No, you don't," Marak shook his head. "Jumping did not save her life, and it endangered thousands of others as they had to come and rescue me."

"You had no choice," soothed Lyra as she began to appreciate the torment that Marak was putting himself through. He was blaming himself for the dragon's death as well as the deaths of all those who perished to rescue him.

"But I did," retorted the Torak. "I should have stayed and fought with her."

"Myka told us that our magic was useless," Lyra pointed out, "and striking out with a blade would cause the demons no harm. You could

not have helped her."

"I think you are wrong," countered Marak. "Kaltara has given us everything we need to succeed in this battle. I could have helped her."

"Now you are being unreasonable," scowled Lyra. "You are just trying to blame yourself for her death. How could you have helped?"

"You were told that the skeletons could only be killed by a strike to the neck," explained Marak. "Is that correct? Was anyone able to kill one in any other manner?"

"Not that I know of," answered Lyra. "We did not try magic, but the instructions we received appeared to be valid. What are you getting at?"

"I killed quite a few on the ride back from the lake," answered Marak, "and not all of them were strikes to the neck."

"Are you sure?" questioned Lyra. "How is that possible?"

Marak removed his hands from Lyra's shoulders and drew his sword. He held it between them, its blade upright pointing towards the sky.

"The Sword of Torak," declared Marak. "It is a gift from Kaltara, and as I said, he has given us everything we need to succeed."

"It can kill the skeletons?" gasped Lyra.

"Easily," nodded Marak, "and if I was to guess, I do believe the cuts that it could deliver to a demon would bleed quite well."

"Merciful Kaltara!" exclaimed the Star of Sakova. "Now I understand why you are berating yourself, but wouldn't Myka have known this?"

"I don't think so," Marak shook his head. "In her previous battles with demons, there was no Torak. The only way she could know is if Kaltara told her, and He has not even told us. He has given us what we need, but the battle is ours to figure out."

"Alright," Lyra nodded. "Your point is well taken. Now that we know what we are up against, we can plan our attack, but you must let go of the past."

"I can't," frowned the Torak.

"You must," Lyra said adamantly. "We have both made mistakes, but there are many people depending upon us. Let's sit down with Rejji and Fisher and see what we can come up with."

"Fisher?" inquired Marak. "He is here?"

"He is called Scarab," grinned Lyra. "The Jiadin leader is actually claiming that Scarab is his little brother. I don't know how he does it, but he has been inside the temple."

"Recently?" Marak asked, his interest growing by the minute.

"Within the past two days," nodded Lyra. "Xavo and Lady Mystic were inside the temple when he was there."

"They have not gone back to Vand, have they?" asked Marak.

“Of course not,” Lyra shook her head. “I am not sure what they are up to, but they have a hidden room in the temple. They saved Fisher when he almost got caught.”

“Then let’s talk,” Marak said with a hint of enthusiasm. “Can we do it here? I am not ready to greet the others.”

Lyra wove an air tunnel to Bakhai and asked to have the Astor and Fisher sent over. Bakhai came as well.

“Tell me what I need to know, Fisher,” ordered Marak.

“There are five hundred thousand of the skeleton creatures,” Fisher began. “There were six demons before today, and there are thirteen highly skilled mages. They are the best mages from the Island of Darkness. The leader’s name is Pakar. Also, Tzargo’s fifty thousand men have been turned into hellsouls. It is going to be quite a fight to get to Vand.”

“So it would seem,” pondered the Torak. “Where are the hellsouls located?”

“They are camped in and around the temple,” answered the Khadoran spy. “The skeletons were held in the city of Vandegar when I left, but now they are the outer ring of Vand’s defense. The demons normally stay on the roof of the palace, but they do go in to dine with Dobuk. I do not know where the mages are, but I would suspect inside the temple.”

“Okay,” nodded Marak as he stooped and picked up a stick. “Now that we know what is facing us, let’s figure out a way to defeat them. Rejji, did everyone come with you?”

“Of course,” smiled the Astor. “We had many questions regarding our slow pace, but we are ready for whatever you need.”

“Excellent,” grinned the Torak as he began drawing in the dirt. “We have always known that we would have to fight Tzargo’s men, and the only thing that has changed in that regards is the fact that they are hellsouls now. It is the additional five hundred thousand that concerns me right now. We are once again badly outnumbered. We will lose the best part of our forces trying to get through them. That is not acceptable. Get Avalar and Ukaro over here.”

While Bakhai ran for the elf and the Chula shaman, the Torak drew a map in the dirt with his stick. When everyone was present, Marak continued.

“We need to drive a wedge between the skeletons and the hellsouls,” declared Marak. “I will not waste our forces fighting something that is already dead. Bakhai, that is your task. Corral the skeletons and make sure that they do not interrupt our battles with Tzargo’s men.”

“When do you want this done?” asked Bakhai.

“Tonight,” answered Marak. “None of our forces will make any

moves to attack until we get the word from you."

"How can he possibly accomplish that?" asked King Avalar.

"Rejji," Marak continued, ignoring the question, "you will have to pull your horsemen away, but don't move them too far. I will need them on short notice."

"What will you need them to do?" asked the Astor.

"There will be a coordinated charge between the Fakarans and the Khadorans," explained Marak. "I want the two groups to squeeze Tzargo's men together, but I want it done in such a way as to leave one side of the temple free of fighters. That means that either the Fakarans or the Khadorans will have to halt and let the other side continue pushing. The Fakarans are more numerous and better skilled for this task so I expect to have the eastern side of the temple cleared of hellsouls. Can you have that coordinated?"

"I will see to it personally," assured the Astor.

"No, Rejji," smiled Marak. "Choose someone capable, but you will be with Lyra and me. We need to confront Vand as one."

"What about the elves?" asked King Avalar.

"The elves," answered the Torak, "must be ready to assemble on the eastern side of the temple. Your group needs to join up with Princess Alahara's group and move as one."

"And the Chula?" asked Ukaro.

"Your people will be with the elves," answered the Torak. "I am not certain what kind of magic to expect from Vand's mages, and that bothers me. It is a topic that you, Avalar, and I have to sit down and discuss with Lyra and Rejji. I feel strongly that your forces will be needed at the temple, but until we can determine what will be cast our way, I can't really come up with a plan."

"We could do that now if you want," offered King Avalar.

"Later," insisted Marak. "Just make the motions to get your people assembled. Lyra and I have something urgent to do right now. When we come back, we will sit down and discuss everything. Any more questions for now?"

There were no questions and the group wandered off leaving Lyra and Marak standing at the edge of the forest.

"What must we do that is urgent?" asked Lyra.

"Can you get us two chokas and the direction that Myka was flying when she died?" he asked.

"She was trying to flee to the east," answered Lyra. "You are not hoping that she survived? Don't do this to yourself, Marak."

"I have no illusions of her immortality," Marak smiled meekly. "I just want to give her a proper burial. It is the least I can do after failing her."

"Would you prefer to go alone?" asked Lyra.

“No,” smiled Marak. “I must confess that I will need your skills to create a hole large enough to hold her.”

“And I thought you wanted me along because you enjoyed my company,” Lyra pouted exaggeratedly.

“That too,” grinned the Torak.

Lyra wove an air tunnel to request a pair of chokas. Within moments, StarWind and HawkShadow appeared with four of the large warbirds. Marak looked askance at the two Sakovans, and HawkShadow smiled broadly in return. Marak sighed humorously and shook his head. He was used to having Halman and Gunta follow him everywhere, so he understood that StarWind and HawkShadow would not let the Star of Sakova travel without them. Without a word, the four warriors mounted the chokas and headed east through the forest.

The group worked their way through the forest and onto the plains well away from the skeletons. The steady clicking of the choka claws was the only sound that emanated from the group as the warbirds sped across the dusty ground. The plains were desolate, and the sun sank low in the western sky. Marak had thought that Myka’s body would be easy to find as it was so large, but he had not planned on searching in darkness.

“Maybe this was a poor idea,” he remarked softly as the sun headed for the peaks of the Fortung Mountains. “We will never find her in the dark, and we must get back in time to discuss our plans with Avalar and Ukaro.”

“How far do you think she could have flown?” asked HawkShadow.

“They were fairly high up,” shrugged Lyra, “much higher than when Marak jumped.”

“You jumped?” StarWind asked with surprise. “Why?”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Marak replied gruffly.

“She was tightly coupled with the demon,” Lyra continued. “They weren’t really flying. It was like watching a shooting star at night. I have no idea how far they could have gotten.”

“We probably are already past where they landed,” sighed Marak. “Let’s turn around.”

“No,” Lyra said adamantly. “This is important to you. I understand that even if you do not. Until you bury her, you will not put the episode out of your mind, and we need your mind to plan our attack.”

“Bury her?” questioned StarWind. “How?”

“That is my task,” replied Lyra.

“Over there,” shouted HawkShadow as he pointed to the south. “There is something large a ways off.”

Everyone abruptly turned to the south and followed

HawkShadow. With the chokas kicking out a fast pace, the hulk of the demon came into view before the sun set. It was a grisly sight, a huge black stone-looking grotesque creature. HawkShadow looked around the horizon for Myka, but he could not find her. He continued riding southward, but Marak stopped next to the demon. The Sakovan assassin turned around and rode back.

"The demon deserves no funeral," frowned HawkShadow. "Let's search for Myka while we still have a bit of light."

"In a minute," Marak said tersely as he drew his sword. "There is something that I must know first."

Lyra watched intently as Marak swung the Sword of Torak into the demon's flesh. The flesh parted and a black substance began to seep out of it.

"Try your rapier," Marak urged Lyra triumphantly. "And HawkShadow, try your sword."

Lyra punctured the beat's skin with her rapier, but HawkShadow could not even break the surface of the solid skin.

"I don't understand," frowned HawkShadow.

"Our swords are gifts from Kaltara," explained Marak. "I thought they would be able to do what other swords could not. Now I know for sure."

"But you didn't know that then," sighed Lyra. "Stop punishing yourself."

"It is more than that, Lyra," Marak responded. "There are three demons left. If magic does not work on them, our weapons are the only things that will."

"Then this trip has already been a success," nodded Lyra. "Let's continue onward for a bit. We must be close."

They remounted their chokas and continued southeast. HawkShadow figured that must have been the direction they were traveling by the impact marks the demon left. HawkShadow got excited when he spotted something large on the horizon, but it was only the beginning of the forest that ran along the Meliban River.

"How could she have come this far?" asked Lyra as she looked up at the brilliant stars overhead. "We must have missed her somehow."

"I don't think so," StarWind said as she pointed at the edge of the forest. "Look at those trees. They were knocked over by something."

"That must have hurt," frowned HawkShadow as he saw large sevemore trees snapped off like you would find after a brutal storm.

"It didn't hurt her any," Lyra said sadly. "She was dead long before she hit those trees."

"Let's find her and do what we have come to do," urged Marak.

HawkShadow led the way into the forest, following the trail of snapped trees. The breaks in the trees gradually got closer to the

ground, and HawkShadow finally stopped next to Myka's carcass. He dismounted the choka and cursed softly as he stepped into a river of blood.

"Be careful where you dismount," he said to the others. "Her blood is all over the place."

The dragon's body was torn and distorted. Long raking cuts split her flesh everywhere they looked. Her wings were bent back at impossible angles, and her head was twisted to one side. A mass of broken trees rested under her body, and blood was flowing everywhere.

Marak dismounted away from Myka's body and walked purposely towards her head. He ignored the streams of blood and knelt next to her head. As his hand ran gently across her face, Marak offered a prayer to Kaltara.

"How are you going to create a hole large enough?" StarWind softly asked Lyra. "Won't that destroy the forest?"

"Let's move away from here and discuss it," Lyra responded just as softly. "Marak needs some time alone with her."

"I guess they were close," StarWind surmised as the three Sakovans moved off into the woods.

"Very close," Lyra nodded with tears in her eyes. "You would never know it from the way Myka talked to him, but she loved him very much, and he knows it. He will never forgive himself for this."

"Forgive himself?" questioned HawkShadow. "What did he do?"

"His faults are in his mind," answered Lyra. "He blames himself for being on her when the first demon attacked, and he blames himself for not being on her when the other demons attacked. He is punishing himself for her death. That is why I think it is important to give her a proper burial. If I have to destroy this forest to do that, I will."

"Will that really help?" asked StarWind. "Wouldn't it have been better for him to remember her how she was instead of seeing this deformed pile of flesh and bones?"

"I will admit," sighed Lyra. "I did not expect her body to look this bad. I guess I should have thought about that. I thought we would just see a dead dragon on the plains, not this."

"This image will haunt him for the rest of his life," HawkShadow said solemnly. "You must keep a close eye on him in the coming days. I would not be surprised to see him use his grief as a weapon and sacrifice his own life."

"What do you mean?" asked Lyra.

"What punishment would he exact on someone who killed Myka this way?" asked HawkShadow.

"He would kill them brutally," answered Lyra.

"And who does he blame for her death?" HawkShadow continued.

“No,” Lyra said adamantly. “I will not let that happen. While any of us may die in the coming days, I will not permit him to throw his life away. I will freeze him if I have to, but I will not stand by and watch him sacrifice himself for a lost friend.”

Chapter 45

Path of Destruction

"Lyra!" shouted Emperor Marak. "Lyra!"

The three Sakovans looked up in alarm. HawkShadow and StarWind immediately drew their swords as they rushed back to the clearing where Myka's body rested. The Star of Sakova ran after them, but she could see no attackers when she arrived. HawkShadow and StarWind glanced once around the clearing and then each of them darted into the woods in different directions. They both clearly thought that someone had threatened the Torak.

"Come here, Lyra," demanded the Torak.

"What is it, Marak?" she asked. "Are you in trouble?"

"Not me," Marak shook his head. "I think I can feel her breath on my hand."

Lyra raced through the streams of blood and slid to a halt next to Marak. She pushed his hand away and substituted her own hand in its place. She held her hand over the dragon's nostrils for several minutes, and finally shook her head.

"I think that is just the heat escaping from her body," Lyra said softly. "Surely her breathing could not be so shallow. I can hardly feel it. A creature of her size would blow me over with the volume of air she must expel."

"She is breathing," Marak said adamantly as HawkShadow and StarWind came back into the clearing and looked quizzically at the couple near the dragon's head. "Heal her."

"Marak," Lyra pleaded, "if only I could. I would do anything for you, but I cannot raise the dead."

Marak leaped to his feet. He clawed his way onto the dragon's snout and with both hands tried to raise Myka's eyelid. HawkShadow, thinking that Marak had gone delirious, sheathed his sword and moved to pull Marak down. Lyra held up her hand to forestall the assassin's move.

"Breathe harder," shouted Marak as he struggled with the eyelid. "Show her you are alive."

Suddenly, the eyelid popped open, and Marak fell backwards to the ground. A low rumble emanated from the snout of the dragon, but the pressure of her breath did not increase. Lyra stared up at the eye staring back at her.

"Praise Kaltara!" Lyra said as she jumped to her feet. "I thought

you had gone crazy."

"Can you heal her?" Marak asked as he picked himself up. "Can you make her whole again?"

"I don't know," admitted Lyra, "but I will certainly try. Go weave an air tunnel back to the camp. Have HawkShadow give directions for LifeTender to get out here. She knows more about healing than I do."

"But you have the power," frowned Marak, "and LifeTender is hours away."

"I have the power that Kaltara gave me," nodded Lyra, "but I do not have the knowledge. Just do what I told you to do, and let me get to work."

Marak nodded and moved away to where StarWind and HawkShadow had retreated. He wove an air tunnel to the campsite and asked for LifeTender. The Sakovan healing mage's voice came through quickly.

"What is it, Emperor Marak?" she asked.

"When we get done talking, I will let HawkShadow tell you how to get here," instructed the Torak, "but I have a few requests first."

"Certainly," LifeTender said pleasantly.

"We found Myka," Marak said quickly, "and she is not dead. Lyra has asked that you come out here to instruct her. I am concerned about the length of time that might require. Can you instruct her through an air tunnel?"

"Not without knowing her condition," replied LifeTender. "What can you tell me?"

"She is in bad shape," admitted the Torak. "The whole ground is covered with blood, and I am willing to bet that she has broken every bone in her body. Her breathing is so shallow that Lyra thought it was just heat escaping from the body."

"That sounds bad," responded LifeTender. "Loss of blood could easily kill her if her other injuries do not. Maybe I should bring some other healers with me."

Marak frowned for a moment as he had hoped to use the air tunnel to give Lyra the instructions she needed, but it was clear that that was not going to work. LifeTender started to speak again, but the Torak interrupted her.

"I want every mage there to leave immediately," ordered the Torak. "That includes the Chula and the elves. In fact," Marak added, "move the whole campsite. Those that are not mages can donate blood, but I want the mages on the fastest chokas and cheetahs. The rest will have to walk."

"Walking will take them the whole night," HawkShadow said softly to the Torak. "What about the attack for tomorrow?"

"LifeTender," Marak said into the air tunnel, "I want someone to

contact the other groups, especially Bakhai. All attacks and preparations are cancelled until I give orders otherwise. Let the warriors at your campsite remain where they are. Instead you are to tell the Fakarans to send men down to donate blood. They are much closer, and they can be here quicker. We will light a fire to guide them here. Do you understand all of my instructions?"

"I believe so," LifeTender answered hesitantly.

Marak sighed with impatience and StarWind stepped next to him and spoke into the air tunnel.

"Cancel all attacks," StarWind said bluntly. "All mages are to come here immediately, and send twenty thousand Fakaran horsemen to us. If you have any questions let us know now."

"No questions," LifeTender said quickly. "We are on our way."

"And hurry," urged Emperor Marak. "I will not let Myka die again."

Marak let the air tunnel drop and returned to the dragon's side. HawkShadow and StarWind followed. They all stood watching Lyra as she cast some type of healing spells.

"Can a dragon's body accept human blood?" HawkShadow asked softly.

"I don't know," admitted Marak, "but she must have some blood, or she will die. There are no other dragons. She is the last."

"Talk elsewhere," snapped Lyra. "I am having a hard enough time trying to find a heartbeat as it is."

"Come help us build that signal fire, Emperor Marak," suggested StarWind.

The Torak gazed upon Myka with concern etched deeply in his face, but he nodded and followed the Sakovan couple out of the clearing. They backtracked along the path of destruction until they reached the end of the forest. Upon the plains they built a huge signal fire and waited for help to arrive.

* * *

Emperor Vand walked out on the roof of the Vandegar Temple. He walked to the southern edge where others had gathered to view the enemy and gazed out over the plains. He saw the distant campfires of the Khadorans and the Fakarans and sneered at them.

"They did not put up much of a fight today," quipped the Emperor.

"They thought it would be easy to conquer Vandegar," nodded Tzargo. "They had not counted on your dead warriors. I think the Aritor clan might have ceased to exist today. There might be a few left in Khadora, but not one of them survived today's ambush."

"I am surprised that the loss of the dragon and the Torak did not cause them all to turn around and go home," cackled Pakar.

“It took three of my demons to defeat them,” snarled Vand, “but it was worth it. Perhaps we should move out tonight and slay them in their sleep.”

“The daylight works against them,” Tzargo shook his head. “At night we would not see their counterattack coming, but during the day their every move can be watched from up here. We are best to just sit tight and wait for them to come and sacrifice themselves.”

“I like that,” grinned Emperor Vand. “Sacrifice. It sounds appropriate.”

“What was the skirmish south of the lake today?” asked Pakar. “I see no campfires in that direction.”

“That was the Jiadin,” answered Tzargo. “For some reason they charged in from the east and then into the forest to the south of the lake. Hours later we saw them head back to the east, but they avoided contact on the way back. Perhaps it was just to test the mettle of the skeletons.”

“Perhaps,” mused Vand. “I have learned to take nothing for granted with these people. Maybe they were planning on rafting across the lake to get closer to the temple, but could not defend their position.”

“Whatever their purpose,” smiled Tzargo, “they left a fair amount of dead on the plains. That gave us a victory in the east as well as the west.”

“What do you think they will try tomorrow, Premer?” asked the Emperor.

“I am not sure,” admitted Tzargo. “They have no real options in terms of strategy. They have to get through the skeletons before they even reach my force. We have a complete ring around my men and the temple. There is no weakness in that structure. All they can do is charge and throw bodies on the ground. By the time they reach my men, they will be but a tenth of what they started with.”

“And they will not expect your men to rise from the dead,” cackled Vand. “Tomorrow will be a glorious day. I want the boy taken alive.”

“The boy?” asked Tzargo.

“The one they call the Astor,” nodded Emperor Vand. “He is not to be harmed. Make sure that everyone hears that message. That goes for you as well, Pakar.”

“Understood,” frowned the head mage, “but why?”

“He is the only one that I can be sure of that has the right knowledge,” smiled Vand. “He absolutely knows the location of Angragar, and he will lead us to it.”

“He won’t want to,” stated Tzargo.

“I know,” the Emperor grinned evilly, “but he will lead us just the

same."

When the Emperor turned to leave the roof, a furtive figure just inside the doorway moved stealthily away. The black-cloaked figure moved swiftly through the dimly lit corridors and slipped through a doorway that hadn't been visible moments before.

"You are back soon," Xavo said as he cast the spell to hide the doorway.

"It was only a short gloating meeting on the roof," replied Lady Mystic.

"And what did you learn tonight?" Xavo asked.

"That Marak and the dragon died today," answered Vand's daughter.

"No," frowned Xavo. "That does not bode well for the attack. Will the Khadorans turn around and go home?"

"They have not done so," shrugged Lady Mystic. "I also heard my father order that the Astor is to be taken alive. Vand wants the location of Angragar and he knows that Rejji has it."

"So they will be trying especially hard to kill the Star of Sakova," frowned Xavo. "We must save my daughter if we can."

"If we can," nodded Lady Mystic, "but our mission is in another direction. We cannot afford to spend much time protecting her unless you have changed your mind."

"No," frowned Xavo, "my mind has not changed, but if Lyra is dead, she cannot fight Vand."

"And that is when we are supposed to confront Dobuk," Lady Mystic nodded in agreement.

"The Three were supposed to be our diversion," stated Xavo. "Dobuk will be lending his power to Vand for that battle. It is when the Great Demon will be at his weakest."

"Which makes losing Marak very bitter," sighed Lady Mystic. "I was hoping that the two of them would gang up on Vand and prolong the fight."

"Two?" Xavo asked in confusion. "There are three of them."

"What I have heard," Lady Mystic replied, "the boy Rejji is not much of a fighter. He doesn't even carry a sword, and he is not a mage. I really can't see him being much help in the battle."

"It does sound like his only purpose was to unite the Fakarans," nodded Xavo, "but he can also be a distraction, especially if Vand needs him alive."

"There is that," shrugged Lady Mystic, "but is your daughter strong enough to take on my father alone? Personally, I find that thought ludicrous. Vand is more powerful than you can imagine."

"After seeing Lyra in action," smiled Xavo, "my imagination can be rather wild. I do not know where she gets her power from, but it is

unlike any that I have ever seen."

"We shall see," Lady Mystic sighed as she eased into a chair. "Vand is expecting a full charge from both the Fakarans and the Khadorans tomorrow. He expects ninety percent of them to die before reaching Tzargo's hellsouls."

"Marak would not sacrifice his people that way," scoffed Xavo. "That is Premer Tzargo's dreams you are listening to."

"But Marak is not around any more, is he?" retorted Lady Mystic.

* * *

The Fakarans were the first to arrive. Thousands of horsemen, guided by the signal fire, flowed into the forest and followed the path of destruction to the wounded dragon. Many of the Fakaran horsemen had elves riding double with them, and Marak's spirits lifted when he saw that Princess Alahara was one of them.

"Mistake," shouted Marak.

Princess Alahara leaped off the back of the Fakaran horse and rushed over to Emperor Marak. She took one glance at Myka and hugged the Torak, burying her head in his chest. Her tears flowed freely, and Marak remembered that Mistake also had a personal encounter with the dragon a long time ago.

"Is there any hope?" Mistake's muffled voice asked.

"If Kaltara is the true god," affirmed Marak, "then Myka will live."

Princess Alahara pushed away from the Torak and gazed into his eyes.

"Are you saying that you will denounce Kaltara if Myka dies?" she asked. "Do you blame Him for her injuries?"

"No," Marak said quickly. "I blame no one but myself for her injuries. What I meant is that Kaltara would never give up on a winged warrior. As long as she has breath, He will watch over her. She will recover. Trust me."

"You do not sound as if you believe those words yourself," the elven princess noted. "I must go to her."

"I will go with you," offered Marak. "Why have the elves come with the Fakarans? Some of them are not mages."

"All of my elven mages are here," answered Princess Alahara as they walked close to the dragon, "but I also brought many warriors. If Myka is to need blood, it will be elven blood that flows in her veins."

"Why?" asked the Torak.

"A couple of reasons," answered the elven princess. "First of all, the elves are an ancient race as are the dragons. If there is much of a difference, it seems reasonable that elven blood would be a closer match. Secondly, the Fakarans will need all of their strength in the coming battles. We cannot afford to have them weakened while they

are hacking the enemy to death, whereas the elves will play a less strenuous part in the battle."

"You have turned into a wise woman, Mistake," smiled Marak. "I find that hard to believe having known you a long time ago, but I now feel privileged to have known you."

"Now I can see why Lyra loves you," chuckled Princess Alahara. "You do have a way with words, Emperor Marak."

When they walked up next to the dragon, Lyra looked up briefly and smiled at Princess Alahara. She rose and suddenly noticed the clearing full of Fakarans and elves.

"What is all this?" she asked. "Why are so many people here?"

"You did not know?" laughed Princess Alahara. "Your lover ordered tens of thousands of people to rush here to offer their blood and magical expertise. We are but the first to arrive."

The Star of Sakova looked questioningly at Marak, who did his best to avoid looking at her. Princess Alahara placed her hand gently on Lyra's arm and smiled.

"It was actually a rather smart move, Lyra," she said. "The attack for tomorrow has been cancelled, and everyone wants to help in any way they can. I thought elven blood would be a better match. Don't you agree?"

"I suppose so," Lyra said distractedly. "Do you know how many hearts a dragon has?"

"How many hearts?" Princess Alahara repeated. "Do you mean they have more than one?"

"I don't know," admitted Lyra, "but I think I am hearing four hearts beating. Is that possible?"

"She is a big creature," shrugged Princess Alahara, "but you are asking the wrong person. I know nothing of dragons, and I doubt that anyone else does. What can I do to help?"

"That's right," Lyra suddenly perked up. "You are a mage now. Come and help me. Marak, send the other mages to us when they arrive."

"I brought some with me," Princess Alahara said as the two women walked around the dragon.

Marak shook his head in wonder and went to summon the mages that Mistake had brought with her. As the area got crowded, Marak started issuing locations where the people could wait. The Fakarans went back out on the plains and set up camp, while the elves found a clearing not too far away from the dragon. The mages all clustered around the giant creature, and Marak walked back out to the signal fire to await the others.

The wait was not long and soon a long column of chokas arrived. The Torak directed the Sakovan and elven mages towards the dragon

and continued waiting. Less than an hour later the Chula arrived with more elven passengers. When he saw King Avalar he waved him down, and the elven king dismounted and walked over to the Torak.

"I see others have arrived before us," commented King Avalar. "You wanted to talk to me?"

"Your daughter was among the first to arrive," replied Marak. "She has grown into a wonderful woman."

"They both are extraordinary," smiled Avalar.

"Do you know how many hearts a dragon has?" the Torak blurted out.

"I have no idea," confessed the elven king, "but I may be able to find out."

"How?" asked Marak.

"I can ask my uncle in Elvangar," answered King Avalar. "Elvangar has a massive library of ancient tomes, and the winged warriors were revered by our people. I have to believe that some time in the past, elves have had occasion to heal the creatures. Is the use of an air tunnel acceptable to you?"

"Absolutely," Marak nodded vigorously. "Anything that can help save Myka's life is acceptable to me."

King Avalar placed a comforting hand on the Torak's shoulder and smiled at him.

"She will survive," promised the elven king. "We will do everything in our power to ensure that. You should also do whatever you can to help."

"I have no knowledge of healing," frowned Marak. "What can I do?"

"Pray," answered King Avalar as he turned and walked away.

By the time King Avalar reached the dragon, the creature was swarming with mages. They crawled over the dragon like bees on a hive. Every little tear in the skin was being closed up with healing spells, and a long line of elven warriors was waiting to donate blood. For all the activity going on, the dragon still appeared dead.

The elven king opened an air tunnel to Elvangar and sent Garl to find the information he needed. He passed the time talking to Queen Alycia and finally Garl returned with the information. The elven king dropped the air tunnel and went in search of the Star of Sakova.

"Only one heart," declared King Avalar when he had found Lyra.

"Yes, I know," Lyra smiled distractedly. "Or rather I should say that it doesn't matter now. I thought I heard four hearts beating when I first examined her and that caused me confusion, but her heart is beating stronger now and it is obvious that it is only one heart. How did you find out?"

"I contacted Elvangar," answered Avalar. "Marak was very

concerned."

"He should have asked me," smiled Lyra. "That question was answered hours ago. At least it gave him something to occupy his time."

"He is very worried," Avalar said sympathetically.

"I know," Lyra sighed compassionately. "Why don't you tell him that Myka will live? It will ease his mind quite a bit."

"Are you sure of that?" he asked.

"Fairly sure," nodded Lyra, "but I cannot say what condition she will be in. Her heartbeat has strengthened a great deal since we have started giving her blood, and her breathing is much more robust now. I have not had time to check with the other mages regarding her injuries, but you may if you wish."

"That is good to hear," remarked Emperor Marak who had come up behind Avalar unseen. "I am sure that she will be as good as new when you get done."

Lyra shook her head and returned to her duties while King Avalar wandered off to talk with the other mages. Marak stood watching the healers work. At times he was called upon to organize work groups to move parts of the dragon as broken bones were mended and parts of the skin that had been inaccessible were healed. Eventually, he wandered off and visited the elven campsite. His mind wandered and exhaustion finally claimed him. He fell asleep and when he woke up, sunlight was filtering down through the trees.

The Torak rose quickly and walked to the clearing where the dragon rested. He was surprised to see that no mages were crawling upon the huge creature. Only a single elven mage sat near the dragon's snout. He walked up to the mage and sat down next to him.

"How is she?" he asked.

"She is alive," answered the healer. "All of her bones are solid, and all of her internal organs appear to be functioning, but not much more."

"What do you mean?" Marak asked with alarm.

"I mean that technically, she is alive," answered the mage, "but she is not awake, and she is not exactly sleeping, either. I am afraid that is the best we can do. She will never fly again. In fact, I doubt that she will ever wake up."

"Where is Lyra?" Marak asked harshly as he rose swiftly.

"She went to sleep over there a couple of hours ago," answered the mage. "There is nothing that she can do. Let her sleep."

Marak left in the direction the mage had pointed and found Lyra with several dozen other mages. The Star of Sakova was fast asleep. Marak bent over and gently shook her. Lyra's eyes creaked open, and she stared up at the Torak.

“I am sorry,” Lyra said when she realized why Marak was there.

“Come with me,” commanded the Torak.

Lyra sighed and rubbed her eyes. She dutifully rose and followed Marak back to the dragon. The Torak dismissed the attending mage and sat Lyra down in his place.

“Marak,” she said, “I am tired. I know that Myka is not how you expected her to be, but we have done all that we can do.”

“If you had done all that you could,” retorted the Torak, “Myka would now be complaining about the lousy conditions of her surroundings.”

“It doesn’t work that way, Marak,” Lyra said with a bit of annoyance. “You cannot just wish her better. I know how much she means to you, but she is beyond our help.”

“But she is not beyond Kaltara’s help,” countered the Torak. “Do you not remember what you did for StormSong? I heard the stories of that miraculous day. I want another one.”

“I don’t even know what I did that day,” confessed Lyra. “I cannot remember it very well, and it has never happened again. I just don’t know what more I can do.”

“You are His servant, Lyra,” Marak said imploringly. “You may not understand what happened that day, but I do, and I was not even there.”

“What are you saying?” asked Lyra.

“I want you to pray for her,” answered Marak. “You have done all that your magic is capable of, but you have forgotten who gave you that magic. All of your power emanates from Him, and you have not used that greatest power yet to help Myka.”

Lyra looked at Marak with sudden understanding. She had prayed for Myka, but not in the same way as she had with StormSong, not with the same intensity. She had relied on her use of magic to heal the dragon, even when she knew there was a greater power available for her.

“You are right,” the Star of Sakova declared. “Join me in prayer.”

“No,” replied Marak. “I have another task to do while you pray.”

“And what is that?” balked Lyra. “You have just pointed out that my failure was one of prayer, and now you refuse to do what you asked of me. What could possibly be more important?”

“You,” smiled Marak. “You are exhausted. I know that you have the power within you to heal Myka, but I will be using my power to heal you while you do Kaltara’s will. Begin.”

Lyra smiled and bowed her head in prayer. She placed both hands on the dragon’s snout and closed her eyes. Marak stood behind her and placed his hands on her shoulders and then closed his eyes in prayer as he fed his energy into the Star of Sakova.

Chapter 46

Then Came the Dawn

Princess Alastasia woke from the nap she had succumbed to. She sat up and looked around the elven camp and saw that most were still sleeping. As she sat quietly trying to wake up, she noticed that most of the missing were mages. She watched as two elven mages left the camp in the direction of the dragon's resting place. She assumed that they were going to see if any further progress had been made. She rose and walked towards the nearest campfire to get something to eat. She noticed several other groups of mages rise and walk out of the camp. She looked for returning elves to get a progress report on the dragon, but none of the mages ever returned. Filled with curiosity, she put down her morning meal and left the camp to see for herself.

When she stepped into the large clearing, the elven princess halted in wonder. She saw Lyra kneeling next to Myka's snout and Marak directly behind her with his hands on her shoulders. Surrounding the dragon and her two friends was a strange, mysterious glow. It was as if the three servants of Kaltara were encased in a magical, protective shield.

"This is strangely familiar," StarWind commented.

Princess Alastasia turned and looked questioningly at the Sakovan spymaster.

"The same thing happened the day Lyra healed StormSong," StarWind continued. "No one has ever been able to explain it to me. Much of what Lyra does is unexplainable."

"But Marak was not there that day in the Sakova," frowned Princess Alastasia. "What is he doing?"

"I am not sure," responded StarWind, "but if I had to guess, I would say that he is feeding energy into Lyra. If so, he is wise indeed. After Lyra healed StormSong and the others, she was totally spent, both physically and mentally. He must know what she is doing and how it will affect her. I mean Myka is much larger than StormSong. It will take everything Lyra has to heal her."

A look of sudden understanding came over the elven princess's face as she nodded in agreement.

"You are wiser than you know," chirped Princess Alastasia as she dashed away.

The Sakovan spymaster looked confused as the elven princess ran to a large group of elven mages. HawkShadow walked up behind Star

Wind and hugged her.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"I am just observing," replied StarWind as she curiously watched the elven mages begin speaking excitedly. "I think MistyTrail is up to something."

"What exactly is she up to?" asked the Sakovan assassin.

"I do not know," admitted StarWind. "We will have to wait and see."

They did not have long to wait. Princess Alastasia started giving orders to the elves, and the mages began gathering near the dragon's snout. None of them touched the dragon, but hundreds of hands stretched out to touch Lyra and Marak. The Chula shamans who had also gathered to watch the strange glow must have understood what the elves were doing, because they quickly joined in, and the crowd surrounding Lyra and Marak grew until there was no more room for anyone to get near. The mages who could not personally reach the servants of Kaltara put their hands on the mages who could reach. Within moments, the strange glow spread across the whole crowd.

"They are joining in," HawkShadow remarked. "I wonder what they are doing."

"They are healing Lyra and Marak," answered King Avalar as he walked up behind HawkShadow. "Those that cannot reach are healing the healers."

"Shouldn't you join them then?" asked StarWind.

"Not yet," the elven king shook his head. "I do not know how long it will take for Lyra to do whatever it is she is doing, but there must be mages available to take the place of those who tire. I will form a second group to relieve the others as they grow weak."

"So you do not know what Lyra is doing then?" asked HawkShadow.

"No," King Avalar shook his head. "I have heard the stories of the day the Star of Sakova healed StormSong and the tent full of wounded, but I have no explanation for it. It is either a type of magic of which the elves have no comprehension, or it is something more than magic."

"I believe it is prayer," said a new voice.

Avalar and the Sakovans turned around and saw Rejji standing not far behind them. The Fakaran king walked forward and joined the group as they turned to stare at the mysterious glow, which was getting brighter by the minute.

"Only the power of Kaltara could account for what Lyra did in the Sakova," the Astor continued.

"Will it work?" asked HawkShadow.

"Have you ever known Kaltara to fail?" the Astor grinned in

response.

Several hours passed before the first mages began to falter from exhaustion. King Avalar immediately gathered replacement mages and began to make substitutions. It was shortly after the new mages had begun their healing that Myka's eye sprang open. A communal gasp rose from the crowd as the dragon's eye flicked back and forth, as if trying to determine where she was. Myka's eye landed on Lyra and Marak, and a giant tear rolled down the dragon's face and splattered on the two Kaltara servants when it struck the ground. Lyra and Marak opened their eyes and rose to their feet. The other mages backed slowly away, and the golden aura winked out of sight.

"How do you feel?" asked the Star of Sakova.

Smoke billowed out of the dragon's nostrils, and her mouth opened wide to show long rows of sharp, giant teeth. Her tongue flicked out and gently pushed the Torak on the chest.

"Why did you jump?" Myka asked.

"I thought you would fight better without me," admitted Marak. "I am sorry for leaving you. I will never cause you tears again. I promise."

"What?" quipped the dragon. "Do not presume that tear was for the two of you saving my life. I just have a problem with my eye. In fact," she grinned, "I think I may have human fingerprints on my eyelid. That must have been the problem."

"It is good to have you back again," grinned Marak. "How do you feel? Is everything working as it should?"

"She needs time," interrupted Lyra.

The winged warrior looked around carefully before rising to her feet. The mages quickly moved back further as the giant dragon flexed her muscles.

"I have never felt better," Myka declared. "I guess it helps having hundreds of personal healers. I owe all of you a debt of gratitude."

"You owe us nothing," smiled Lyra. "You are Kaltara's gift to us. It is our duty to do what we can to keep you safe. Are you sure that everything is working well?"

Myka turned around in the clearing and belched long fingers of flame along the path of destruction.

"If everyone will give me some room," answered Myka, "I will go aloft and find out."

The mages scattered, taking shelter well away from the trail of broken trees. Lyra frowned and started to object, but Marak smiled and placed his hand on her shoulder.

"Let her do what she was born to do," he said softly. "We must be sure that she is fit for battle."

The dragon leaped into the air and soared into the sky. Marak

raced for the edge of the forest as he kept his eyes skyward to observe the dragon in flight. He lost sight of her for a short time, but when he reached the plain he saw the dragon doing aerobatics above him. Myka noticed the lone figure below and swooped down on him. Flames preceded her arrival, and Marak felt their warmth. He knew that Myka wanted him to feel threatened, but he held his ground. He knew that Myka would never hurt him. The dragon landed gently in front of him.

"You did not even flinch," Myka said with disappointment.

"I know you too well," smiled the Torak.

"Not as well as you think you do," retorted the dragon. "There is no need for you to feel as though you have failed me. Your jumping probably saved both of our lives, but I will not let you ride me again until the other three demons are defeated. I was wrong to endanger the Torak. I should have refused to take you up in the first place."

"That is where you are wrong," countered the Torak. "I am meant to use what Kaltara has offered me, and that includes you. You are my winged warrior."

"Not while demons live and breath," the dragon shook her massive head. "There are three of them left, and I will defeat them all."

"We will defeat them all," grinned the Torak. "We are a team."

"We have been through this already," replied Myka. "Your magic is useless against them."

"That may be," countered Marak, "but the Sword of Torak is not. You see," he added, "I should have used it instead of jumping clear. Together we could have killed them without both of us nearly dying."

"Your sword?" questioned the dragon. "You presume a great deal."

"I presume nothing," asserted Marak, "and it is not my sword. It is Kaltara's sword. I tested it on the carcass of the last demon you killed. Lyra's rapier works as well. Both sliced through the flesh of the carcass."

"Amazing," the stunned dragon said. "And together we failed to realize this?"

"Kaltara never said we were smart," grinned the Torak.

The dragon bellowed with laughter and people gathered at the edge of the forest to see what was happening. Myka looked past Marak and saw the hundreds of faces watching with curiosity.

"How long have I postponed the battle?" she asked.

"Only a day," answered Marak. "The good part about that is that Vand will think you are dead."

"Not for long," snarled Myka. "I still have work to do."

"You do indeed," nodded the Torak, "but not just yet. As soon as

you show up, those three demons will come straight for you. Why not wait until Vand tries to use them for another task and take them by surprise?"

"I like surprises," murmured the dragon, "but what difference will it make how we meet them? Why not circle the temple and dare them to come out and play?"

"Two demons nearly killed you," answered Marak. "Why face three at once unless you have to?"

"Maybe they will come out one at a time," posed the dragon.

"Possibly," admitted Marak, "but that did not happen yesterday. I think Vand might have observed what happened to Barrok and made the other two join against you. If he finds out that you are alive, he will surely send all three at once. He will not allow their pride to interfere."

"Alright," conceded Myka. "How do you plan to separate them?"

"By giving him another reason to use the creatures," answered the Khadoran Emperor. "You should rest here the remainder of the day while I send everyone else to their places. After they are gone, I will explain the plan to you."

"That will give me time to find something to eat," agreed the dragon. "I am famished."

* * *

After the sun went down that night Rejji ordered the Fakaran horsemen to new locations. They were ordered not to light any new campfires, but they were not told the reason why. The free tribes were split in two with a large gap between their forces. The Jiadin were moved further to the south leaving another large gap in the eastern lines. Unseen by the Fakaran horsemen, or their horses, were four long columns of dark creatures moving slowly towards the Motangan defensive lines. Two columns of tyriks moved around the ends of the Fakarans. When they had crossed the desolate no man's land, the tyriks began spinning their webs.

While the giant spiders were creating their fence around the skeletons, two more columns of tyriks passed through the two new gaps in the Fakaran lines. The new columns were meant to separate the skeleton creatures from the hellsoul warriors and the temple, leaving the entire skeleton army divided into two totally enclosed areas from which they could not escape.

While the outermost columns of tyriks proceeded unnoticed by anyone, the inner columns had to carve a path through the skeletons. The dead creatures swarmed to interdict the giant spiders, but their swords were useless. The tyriks batted the skeletons aside and spun webs to contain them. The skeletons could not cry out in alarm, but the tyriks eventually ran into Tzargo's hellsouls. At first only the

Motangan sentries noticed the large black shapes moving between them and the skeleton army. The tyriks quickly immobilized the sentries by injecting them with poison and then wrapping them in small webs and leaving them behind, but their stealth could not be maintained forever.

Shortly before dawn, someone noticed the immobilized sentries. Shouts rippled through the encampment and soon the entire Motangan camp was awake. Torches flared to life, and the shouts increased to a frenzied pitch as the tyriks were sighted. Most of the Motangan soldiers retreated towards the temple, but some of them attacked the tyriks believing that their multiple lives made them invincible. The attacking hellsouls slashed out with their swords, but the tyriks were hard to wound. The giant spiders turned on the attackers, spinning strands of web to encase the Motangans or injecting them with fast-acting, paralyzing poison. While the battle raged, the tyriks that had spun the outer webs turned inward to complete the task abandoned by the two inner columns.

Far above the battlefield, on the roof of the temple, Vand scowled into the predawn light with anger. Bolts of lightning streaked downward from his raised hands and burst into the clumps of tyriks. Some of the giant spiders suddenly exploded, the smoke from their burning carcasses curling up into the sky. As Vand screamed obscenities and continued casting murderous lightning bolts upon the spiders, Pakar and his twelve appeared on the roof.

“Join me in destroying the spiders,” shouted Emperor Vand, “but send one of your men to summon Zarapeto and the others. I want these beasts destroyed.”

Pakar directed one of his men to find the demons and return with them. He then directed the rest of his mages to attack the spiders. With thirteen mages attacking from above, the tyriks scurried to the east and to the west. While the tyriks could move quickly for short periods of time, they eventually had to slow down. That was the reason that Rejji had been moving his troops only a half day at a time. The tyriks could move no faster over long distances. The quick scurrying carried many of the tyriks beyond the range of the mages, but many more had died before they could get clear. Scores of burning hulks littered the ground and columns of rising smoke filled the sky obscuring the view from the roof.

“Our master calls?” Zarapeto’s deep voice boomed.

Vand spun around to face the three remaining demons.

“I want every one of those spiders killed,” ordered Emperor Vand as he pointed aimlessly at the battlefield and the retreating tyriks. “Do not let a single one of them escape. When the three of you have killed them all, join us in the throne room. I want the rest of our opponents

destroyed today. I will determine what part each of us gets to enjoy."

The Emperor did not wait for a response, as none was necessary. He marched across the roof and entered the temple. Pakar and his mages quickly followed, leaving the demons alone on the roof.

Zarapeto looked down from the roof at the fleeing tyriks. He grinned maliciously and pointed to a large group heading to the southeast.

"Xero," he bellowed, "those are yours. Yunga, you get the ones going northeast. I will take the ones going to the west."

"You are getting more than us," accused Xero. "Trade with me."

"I was summoned," spat Zarapeto, "and I received the order. Do as you are told."

Without giving the other demons a chance to argue, Zarapeto leaped into the air and sped westward. Yunga grunted with distaste and also took to the air to complete his task. Xero growled and spat at the retreating Zarapeto, but the other demon was already too far away. The acidic spittle fell to the ground and landed on a Motangan soldier who promptly screamed as the acid ate into his flesh. Xero grinned in appreciation and leaped into the air and headed to the southeast.

Far to the southeast, Emperor Marak sat on the dragon's back. The slit in Myka's scale that the Torak had used to house his knife no longer existed. It had been healed with the rest of the dragon, but that no longer mattered. The Torak had created a harness that would hold him in place on the dragon's back. As he saw the three demons split up and begin attacking the retreating tyriks, he tested the harness and ordered Myka into the air.

"Place your sword along my body," instructed the dragon. "Do not let Xero see it before we make our move."

Myka flew low over the plain southeast of Vandegar. She kept an eye on the demon that was heading towards them, but Xero had not noticed the approaching threat yet. The demon was intent on killing the tyriks, and it felt quite invincible. As the dragon started to pass over the fleeing tyriks, Xero noticed her. The demon's wings faltered for a heartbeat and its eyes blinked as if not believing what they were seeing.

"The demon has seen you," announced Emperor Marak.

Myka did not need to respond as she had already begun to soar skyward. The dragon did not fly towards the approaching demon, but rather shot almost straight up as if she were trying to get above the creature without being seen. The demon hissed, its wings flapping furiously as it strove to cut off the dragon.

"You must act swiftly," Myka warned softly. "You will recognize the moment."

When the collision appeared imminent, the demon's talons stretched outward towards the dragon. Myka tilted forward so that her body was parallel to the ground and then pulled her wings in tightly to her body. For barely a second the dragon seemed to hang in the air motionless. It was during that precise second that the demon screeched overhead. Marak swiftly raised the Sword of Torak and rent the creature's underside.

Myka dropped like a rock, the ground hurrying upward at a dizzying rate. The dragon's wings flared out to break the decent, and Marak's body slammed against the dragon's scales. Before Marak could even bounce back, Myka had banked sharply to reverse direction, her eyes scanning the sky in search of Xero. Black, acidic blood flowed out of the demon's gashed body, but it had also turned around and was diving towards the dragon.

"My turn," Myka declared. "Hold your sword high, and let Xero see what has caused its wound. That will be the distraction I need."

As the two huge flying beasts approached one another at a frantic pace, Emperor Marak held the Sword of Torak high above him. The rising sun glinted off the sword, and Xero howled with vengeance. The demon set its eyes on the Torak and flapped it wings even faster. Just as Xero stretched its talons to shred the Torak, Myka increased her angle of ascent and snapped her jaws shut on the demon's neck. The two behemoths collided roughly and began to fall as they struggled. For a short period, Marak was actually upside down, praying to Kaltara that the harness would hold, but the struggle ended quickly. Myka opened her mouth and let the body of the demon fall from the sky. The dragon swiftly righted herself and headed northward to engage Yunga.

"Are you alright?" asked Marak. "Do you need healing or a rest before the next demon?"

"I have never felt better," grinned the dragon. "Yunga has seen us already, but Zarapeto has not. Let's engage while the odds favor us. Hide your sword again."

Yunga had already destroyed all of the tyriks in the northeast and had turned southward to help Xero. That is when the second demon had seen Xero fall from the jaws of the dragon. Yunga screeched loudly in alarm, but Zarapeto was too far to the west to hear it. Yunga had the choice of fleeing from the dragon or fighting it alone. The demon hissed menacingly and decided to fight.

"Same plan?" asked the Torak.

"No," answered Myka. "Yunga knows that I have seen him. He will not fall for that ruse."

"What is the plan then?" asked Marak.

"We improvise," replied the dragon.

“You mean we have no plan?” Marak asked accusingly.

“That too,” Myka said defensively. “I will think of something. Have you never made up plans in the middle of a battle? Do you not fight on instincts alone sometimes?”

“I do,” admitted Marak, “but I try not to. It is always better to have a plan.”

“Stop whining,” chuckled Myka. “One of us will kill Yunga.”

Marak gripped his sword as the two giants raced head on towards each other. The demon came in fast and level, and once again it appeared as if they would collide. The Torak wondered which of them would turn away from the collision first. After a few more seconds, he believed that neither one of them would give up until they crashed into each other.

“Raise your sword,” Myka shouted urgently as her body suddenly rolled over.

At the last minute the dragon rolled upside down, just above the level of the charging demon. Marak hung upside down and shoved his sword downward at the demon. The impact of the demon’s head upon the blade nearly tore the Sword of Torak from his hands, but Marak maintained control of the weapon as it sliced the demon’s body open. Myka flipped in a loop to attack the demon from behind, but there was no need. Yunga’s body toppled downward and splattered on the ground.

“Incredible,” remarked Marak. “That was too easy. The Sword of Torak is indeed deadly against the demons.”

“Easy?” retorted the dragon. “Do you know what strength it takes to make that maneuver, not to mention the superb timing required to escape a deadly collision? Easy! What do you know?”

“I know that we make a great team,” the Torak grinned.

“We do, don’t we?” chuckled the dragon as she turned westward to engage the final demon in mortal combat.

Myka’s eyes scanned the sky looking for Zarapeto, but the demon was nowhere to be found. Unexpectedly, a bolt of lightning flashed in the clear sky and streaked towards the dragon. Myka immediately took evasive action by dropping and banking. The bolt of lightning flashed perilously close by and the dragon continued to fly erratically. More flashes lit the sky, and it appeared that several bolts were sizzling nearby instead of only one.

“Head south,” ordered the Torak. “There are mages on top of the temple. They are aiming for us.”

“I did not think it was a thunderstorm,” quipped the dragon as she dropped low to the ground and continued to zigzag in a southerly direction.

Myka intentionally flew over the skeleton army that was

entrapped by the tyrik webs. She cackled with delight every time one of the bolts aimed at her smashed into the skeletons.

“Enjoying yourself?” quipped Marak. “If one of those lightning bolts hits us, we won’t find it humorous.”

“No human can forecast the path of a dragon,” retorted Myka. “Let them try.”

Suddenly, thirteen bolts rained down out of the sky directly in front of the dragon. Hundreds of skeletons flew into the air, and pieces of bone bounced off the dragon.

“And if they get lucky?” Marak asked nervously.

The dragon had no reply. She was too busy flapping her wings as fast as she could as she continued to zigzag towards the south.

Chapter 47

Assault on the Temple

The sizzling bolts of lightning stopped as the dragon flew over Lake Jabul, and Myka turned to look for Zarapeto as she continued flying southward.

"There is no sign of the last demon," she reported.

"The demon is not our only worry right now," replied Emperor Marak. "The Khadoran and Fakaran horsemen are due to begin the attack at sunrise."

"It is sunrise now," retorted the dragon.

"And the horsemen will be slaughtered if Vand's mages have nothing else to attack," the Torak nodded. "We have to go back."

"Fight the mages before we have exterminated the final demon?" questioned Myka.

"We must," Marak said seriously, "but we will need some help."

"A great deal of help," agreed the dragon. "Where do you want me to go?"

"Pick up the Star of Sakova," answered the Torak. "She is waiting in the forest south of the lake."

Marak expected some quip out of the dragon about Lyra not being the great amount of help that he had just spoken about, but the dragon did not offer any humor. Marak smiled inwardly at the dragon's new appreciation for the Star of Sakova and her abilities. Myka swept down and landed on the plain near the edge of the forest. Lyra, StarWind, HawkShadow, LifeTender, and Rejji came running out of the forest.

"The last demon returned to the temple while the mages cast their spells at you," Lyra reported. "Are either of you hurt?"

"We are invincible," grinned the dragon.

"We need your help, Lyra," answered the Torak. "We must divert those mages from concentrating on the horsemen. Climb up."

"You are going to use Lyra as a target?" objected StarWind. "Let me go in her place."

"You do not have her skills," interjected Rejji as he helped Lyra onto the dragon's back. "We will keep her safe."

"We?" frowned Marak as Rejji scampered up behind Lyra.

"We," the Astor nodded. "It is the Three who must end this threat to the world. From now on, we must be inseparable."

"He speaks wisely," Myka responded as she flapped her massive

wings and leaped into the air. “There may not have been time to come back for the Astor.”

“It is decided then,” frowned the Torak as he watched the ground below recede, “but remember that neither of them have harnesses. I could hold Lyra, but not both of them.”

“I understand,” the dragon replied curtly. “How do you want to begin this diversion?”

“Get us close enough to use light blades,” answered the Torak. “Maybe the mages will not be shielded.”

“Unlikely,” frowned Lyra.

“Do you have a better suggestion?” asked Marak.

“Get Lyra onto the roof of the temple,” offered Rejji. “She can raise her blue cylinder and draw attention away from us.”

“But I cannot cast with the spell of protection around me,” objected Lyra. “I will be useless.”

“Useless?” echoed Marak. “Hardly. Rejji is right. If the mages focus on attacking you, I can continue to attack from Myka. Even if some of the mages split their attention between us, the horsemen will be spared.”

“I will get you on the roof, Daughter of Kaltara,” declared the dragon. “You must trust me and jump when I tell you to. Do not delay, and do not ask questions. Just jump when I say to.”

* * *

Pakar sighed in frustration as the dragon fled out of range of his mages. He stood staring at the retreating speck in the sky as Zarapeto landed on the roof.

“Why didn’t you attack the dragon?” questioned the head mage. “Between our spells and your attack, the dragon would have died.”

Zarapeto snarled at the mage, black spittle spraying from his lips.

“Because I told it to return here,” stated Emperor Vand. “I will not lose my last demon by sending it after the enemy on their terms. Did you not witness the destruction of the other demons? Zarapeto is best suited right here in the temple where the dragon cannot go.”

The demon seethed in rage, not only at Pakar’s words, but also at Vand’s statement that he could not defeat the dragon alone. Zarapeto would have liked to reach out and crush someone, but Dobuk had forbidden it.

“The Khadorans are attacking,” shouted one of the mages.

“And horsemen from the east as well,” added another.

“Deal with them,” ordered Vand as he turned towards the doorway to the temple. “Zarapeto, join me in Dobuk’s chamber.”

The demon growled, but he followed the Emperor into the temple and into the sacred chamber where Dobuk resided. Vand bowed low as he entered the presence of the Great Demon. Dobuk did not look

pleased with his disciple.

"You have squandered that which I have given you," accused Dobuk. "Is this all that is left?" he asked as he pointed to Zarapeto.

"We thought that there was only one dragon," Vand answered timidly. "You should have told me that there were two."

"It is the same dragon," interrupted Zarapeto. "It is Myka, the last of the dragons. I can kill her myself."

"How?" balked Vand. "I saw her die."

"Kaltara is active in this battle," snarled Dobuk. "You should have expected that. Keep Zarapeto close to you. Let your armies destroy their armies. Let your mages destroy their mages. You are strong enough to resist the Three, and you will have Zarapeto to give you overwhelming odds. We will deal with the dragon afterwards. Return to the throne room and prepare for their arrival."

Vand bowed low again and backed out of the sacred chamber. The demon followed him to the throne room and hovered near as the Emperor settled into his throne.

"We should not meet the enemy here," Vand muttered aloud. "We should meet them in Dobuk's presence. We will return to the sacred chamber."

"That is not allowed," Zarapeto declared.

"Not allowed?" balked Vand. "What do you mean?"

"Should Dobuk directly enter the fray," explained the demon, "then Kaltara will as well. That would mean the end of the world, no matter who won. It is forbidden."

"But Kaltara brought the dragon back to life," protested Vand.

"Not directly," the demon shook its head. "Dobuk would know if that was true. Kaltara used others to accomplish the task, just as Dobuk allowed you to raise the dead army. Where do you want me to hide?"

"Hide?" questioned Vand. "Don't you think that they will be expecting to find you here?"

"Expecting to find me and actually knowing where I am are two different things," Zarapeto grinned wickedly. "I will choose my own method of hiding."

* * *

Pakar was busy directing his mages in the attack against the Khadorans and Fakarans when the dragon appeared high overhead. Their attention had been so focused on destroying the horsemen, that Myka had been able to approach unseen until Pakar noticed the shadow race across the roof. He was about to cast a lightning bolt at the dragon, but he could not as it was directly overhead. If the dragon avoided the bolt, it would smash down upon his own men.

"The dragon is back," shouted the head mage. "Strengthen your

shields until we get a good shot at her."

Even as his warning was being delivered, light blades flew from the back of the dragon and smashed into the surface of the roof. The light blades hit one of the mages and a bright nimbus glowed around him as he struggled to maintain his shield.

The dragon darted around nimbly, which while it made the throwing of light blades rather ineffective, it also provided a futile target for the Motangan mages. Myka began an orbital path around the temple and zigzagged to avoid the enemy's lightning bolts. It took several revolutions of the dragon before Pakar's mages realized that their lightning bolts were slamming into the hellsouls below.

"Stop," shouted Pakar. "Ignore them and focus on the horsemen. Keep your shields strong, and they cannot hurt us. Let them fly in circles."

The Motangan mages returned their attention to the battle below and began blasting the horsemen that were engaging the hellsouls.

"Not good," frowned Marak. "We must divert their attention."

No one answered, but Myka immediately altered her flight path. She swung over the roof as far away from the Motangan mages as she could.

"Jump now," commanded the dragon.

Lyra jumped without hesitation. She rolled herself into a ball as she had done when practicing her sword fighting. She came to her feet and immediately cast her blue cylinder of protection.

"Don't back up," came a soft voice from behind her.

Lyra turned and saw Rejji kneeling behind her.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"Guarding your back?" Rejji replied sheepishly. "I lost my grip when you jumped. Don't look at me and maybe they will not notice me."

Lyra shook her head and turned to face the Motangan mages. From behind her on Myka's back, Marak threw several light blades that slammed into the pile of mages. One of them turned and saw Lyra standing on the roof.

"It is one of the Three," he announced loudly.

Pakar and the others turned to stare at Lyra and her blue cylinder. They all reacted swiftly, and a myriad of spells went soaring towards the Star of Sakova. Her cylinder flared briefly from the magical impacts, but nothing appeared to harm her. The mages kept up a barrage of spells, working their way through their entire inventory of magical projectiles.

"Nothing seems to affect her," scowled one of the mages.

"Keep trying," ordered Pakar. "Every shield has its limit. There are more than enough of us to weaken her shield and kill her."

* * *

Blaka, the leader of the Extala tribe, led the Fakaran charge. All of the tribes, free tribes and Jiadin, joined together in a tight knot and charged through the gap created by the tyrik webs. The Fakaran horsemen excelled in cavalry tactics, and the warriors surged into the mass of hellsouls, lopping off heads as they raced towards the temple.

The Khadoran cavalry was accustomed to a different type of fighting. Lord Marshal Yenga of the Torak clan led the western horsemen. The Khadorans advanced more cautiously than the Fakarans, striking down the hellsouls in any way they could. When the once-dead creatures resurrected, they were struck down again by riders farther back in the pack. A hellsoul might be killed three or four times before someone succeeded in removing its head, and the pace was slower, but they also gained steadily on the Temple at Vandegar.

Unexpectedly, lightning bolts from the roof of the temple began smashing into the ranks of both the Fakarans and Khadorans. The charges faltered as hundreds of horsemen and their mounts were blasted into charred debris. The horsemen were so tightly packed that the lightning bolts were highly effective. Lightning bolts followed one after another, and nowhere on the battlefield was safe. Yenga sounded the retreat, which was immediately echoed by Blaka.

As had been prearranged, elven archers moved forward from both the east and west. They kept to the sides of the horsemen and were soon joined by Chula shamans. The elven archers fired volleys of pointed arrows into the hellsouls while the Chula shamans used light blades to attack. The horsemen retreated under the cover of the elves and Chula and quickly regrouped. Once the horsemen were clear, the elves and Chula backed away.

“This is far enough,” shouted Yenga as the lightning bolts ceased. “Let our unmounted friends get clear before we try it again.”

“We are going back into that slaughter?” asked one of the nearby men.

“We are,” Lord Marshal Yenga nodded as he looked up and saw the dragon circling over the temple. “This battle ends when Vand’s forces are defeated and not before. If you don’t have the stomach for that then you can come up front and ride beside me.”

“I don’t mind fighting,” balked the Khadoran soldier, “but lightning is not battle.”

“It is as much a part of battle as creatures that rise from the dead,” countered Yenga. “It is not important how you die. What is important is how many of the enemy you kill before your death. There will be no life for any of us if we fail here today.”

Cheers ripped through the Khadoran army as the lightning bolts resumed because the deadly missiles were falling on the Motangan

soldiers instead of the Khadorans. Yenga looked puzzled at the development and then his eyes rose to the roof of the imposing building. He saw the lightning bolts aimed at the dragon and grinned broadly.

"Clever creature," Yenga mumbled under his breath as the lightning bolts continued to slam into the hellsouls.

The lightning bolts hitting the Motangan soldiers suddenly stopped. A few moments later the mages directed the bolts at the horsemen again, but the Khadorans were well out of reach. For a long moment the battlefield remained frozen with neither side attacking. The area between the forces erupted in fountains of dirt as the magical lightning bolts blasted into the ground. Lord Marshal Yenga watched as the dragon passed over the roof of the temple. He saw two of the humans on her back jump or fall to the roof, and then he saw a blue cylinder shoot skyward.

"Resume the charge," Emperor Marak said softly in Yenga's ear.

Yenga grinned and waved at the distant dragon. He raised his arm high in the air and shouted for the attention of his men.

"Khadorans," shouted Lord Marshal Yenga. "Charge!"

The horsemen charged from the east and west as the hellsouls once again took up defensive positions. The elves and Chula followed the horses once again to provide for a safe retreat if it was needed.

High above the heads of the hellsouls, the dragon flew around the temple while the Torak threw light blades at the Motangan mages. Myka watched the flaring of the magical shields for any signs of weakening.

"The one farthest to the west," the dragon said softly. "His shield flickers faintly. Concentrate on him."

"Can you get me in closer?" asked Emperor Marak. "I would like to try something more physical. Most shields are more effective against magic than they are against a physical object."

"With pleasure," grinned the winged warrior.

While the dragon looped west of the temple, Marak sheathed his sword and grabbed several Sakovan stars from his pouch. Myka dropped below the level of the roof as she approached the temple. Marak watched the stone wall of the temple approaching at a rapid rate and mentally prepared for the uplift. At the last moment before impact, the dragon soared upward and over the edge of the roof.

The Torak quickly took aim and threw two Sakovan stars at the nearest mage. He watched with satisfaction as the stars bit into their target. The mage's hands went to the star in his temple even as his body fell to the roof. Myka swept just over the heads of the mages, her voice cackling in triumph.

"This is more like it," grinned the dragon.

Marak heard screaming from below the dragon. He could not see the source of the screaming, but he looked back at the roof and quickly counted Motangan mages.

"You have one," the Torak said accusingly.

"Not for long," chuckled Myka as the screams suddenly died. "I really wouldn't eat such a thing."

As the dragon banked over the tyrik-web pens holding the skeleton creatures, Marak saw the lifeless body of a Motangan mage tumble downward.

"Let's go weaken some more of them," smiled Marak.

The dragon banked sharply for another run at the temple.

* * *

Pakar instinctively ducked as the dragon flew low overhead. He didn't bother to be distracted by the dragon, but he thought he heard screaming as Myka passed by. His eyes flicked to his left, and he quickly counted heads. Two mages were missing. He frowned with concern and then saw two black-cloaks dash from the door of the temple and run around behind the small structure in the center of the roof. He nodded approvingly as he thought that two of his men had taken the initiative to get closer to the blue cylinder. Only when the spells from the two black-cloaks began impacting on his shields did he understand that something was wrong.

"Who are they?" yelled Pakar.

"Xavo and Lady Mystic," one of his men replied.

"Traitors!" shouted Pakar. "Some of you go get them."

Two mages split off from the group and approached the hidden traitors. It was at that moment that Myka and the Torak returned.

"Do not harm the two behind the structure," warned Marak as he threw a Sakovan star at one of the advancing mages. "They are friends."

"They should dress differently," Myka scowled as her claws grabbed the other advancing mage and carried him off.

"How are you able to pierce their shields?" Marak asked as the dragon discarded another dead mage.

"The same way that you can kill them with your stars," answered the dragon. "When their shields weaken, it is the physical protection that fails first."

"My stars won't hurt me if their shields are too strong," frowned Marak. "I will just fail to kill them. The same cannot be said for your claws. You may cripple yourself."

"Lyra will heal me," retorted the dragon. "Stop trying to save them all for yourself. His shields were already weak, and he was running. Do you have any idea how hard it is to maintain a shield while you are running?"

“Actually, I do,” laughed Marak, “but I am sure that you do not. Just be careful. I don’t want to see you hurt again.”

“Then use some more of those light blades to soften up another two,” replied the winged warrior. “My claws are itching for more Motangan flesh.”

* * *

“Filthy beast,” swore Pakar as he saw the dragon carry off one of his men and the other fall dead to the roof with a star in his head.

The head mage quickly saw that his position was untenable. They could not stay on the roof and battle magical foes while the dragon attacked at will. Regardless of Vand’s orders, Pakar made the decision to move inside the temple and continue the fighting where the dragon could not go. He shouted orders to his men and began moving slowly towards the entrance to the temple. He would not run and take the chance of his shield failing.

Lyra saw what Pakar had in mind, and she moved slowly to intercept the group. Unfortunately, her movement left Rejji exposed and visible to the mages. One of the mages immediately shouted as his arm rose to strike Rejji down.

“No!” shouted Pakar. “Leave him. He is the one who is not to be harmed. Get inside quickly.”

The Motangan mages raced for the doorway with Pakar in the lead. Xavo and Lady Mystic took advantage of their haste and killed two mages before the rest slipped inside the building. Lyra halted at the doorway and watched as the Motangan mages disappeared around the corner of a corridor. Xavo and Lady Mystic halted alongside Lyra. The Star of Sakova looked at the two with a puzzled expression.

“I am your father,” smiled Xavo, “and this is my friend, Lady Mystic. She is Vand’s daughter.”

Lyra stared at her father’s new body for several moments before her blue cylinder winked out. She stepped away from the doorway and embraced Xavo.

“I don’t care what your name is,” she said lovingly, “nor what you look like. I am glad to see you.”

“And I am awestruck once again by your power,” smiled Xavo. “Did your shield ever weaken at all?”

“Not that I know of,” shrugged Lyra as she turned to Lady Mystic.

Lady Mystic smiled in a friendly manner but did not speak.

“I have heard of your decision to stand against your father,” said the Star of Sakova. “You are a brave woman.”

“Not so brave that I would depend upon shields as the only thing between me and Pakar’s dirty dozen,” replied Lady Mystic. “You must truly trust Kaltara to shield you.”

“My life is in His hands,” smiled Lyra. “He will never let me

down. I hope that I do not let Him down."

"You should stay here and wait for the Torak," advised Xavo. "Lady Mystic and I are very familiar with the interior of the temple. We will find Pakar and his men and finish them off. We will return to let you know when it is safe to pursue Vand."

"I think I can do that task safer than you," objected Lyra. "I have lost you twice already. I do not need to go through that again."

"Your blue cylinder cannot be used inside the temple," Xavo shook his head. "It will bring the walls down upon you."

Lyra frowned as she digested her father's words. Suddenly she smiled and shook her head.

"That will not happen," she declared. "I have used it indoors before."

"Still," interjected Lady Mystic, "you do not seem capable of casting while you maintain your shield. There is little that you could do when you found Pakar. Let Xavo and me take care of the problem."

"What are you two up to?" Lyra asked suspiciously. "You both seem very intent on keeping me out of the temple."

"We want you in the temple," Xavo said defensively, "but not until Pakar and his men are eliminated. Save your energy for Vand and his pet demon."

"The last demon is inside?" asked the Star of Sakova.

"He will be with Vand," nodded Lady Mystic. "I must warn you, Lyra. Do not underestimate my father. His powers derive directly from Dobuk. You cannot imagine the strength he possesses. All of the rest of his armies are merely a source of enjoyment to him. He has never truly needed them."

"Strong or not," replied Lyra, "it is Vand that we have come for. We will not leave until he is dead."

"We had no thoughts that you would say otherwise," responded Xavo, "but heed her words. Do not underestimate his power."

Everyone looked up as Myka soared overhead. The Dragon settled on the roof and Emperor Marak leaped off. As soon as he was on the roof, the dragon leaped back into the air.

"Where is she going?' asked Rejji.

"She is going to play with the hellsouls," Marak shook his head in amusement. "What is the situation here?"

Lyra explained what had been discussed, and Marak squinted suspiciously at Xavo and Lady Mystic.

"Why not just tell us what it is that you two really want to do?" questioned Marak.

"We just want to help," shrugged Xavo, "and I don't want my daughter tired from minor skirmishes when we can take care of them. Is that so hard to understand?"

“No,” replied the Torak, “but it is hard to believe. We shall all go in and hunt down Pakar’s men. Where is Vand likely to be?”

“He will wait for you in the throne room,” answered Lady Mystic, “but Pakar and his men will be elsewhere. They will not risk incurring Vand’s wrath for abandoning the roof.”

“Fine,” Marak nodded decisively. “We will all hunt down Pakar and his men before entering the throne room. Let’s go.”

Xavo sighed with defeat and stepped through the doorway. Lady Mystic followed closely and by the time the Three had entered, they were already lost to sight.

Chapter 48

Isolation

The Lord Marshal of the Torak clan watched as his men traded blows with the Motangans. While the Khadorans were constantly able to move closer to the temple, the cost of gaining territory was excessive. Most of the Motangans were struck down with blows that did not result in decapitation. The hellsouls rose again, and had to be killed once more. Lord Marshal Yenga stood tall in his stirrups and gazed across the battlefield. While his own Khadoran army was slowly pushing back the Motangan hellsouls, the Fakaran tribes were slashing through the enemy with a swiftness that he could only admire. He watched as the Jiadin and free tribesmen leaned far out of their saddles to lop off the heads of the Motangans. Mentally calculating the relative distance to the temple from the two opposing forces, Yenga decided to halt the Khadoran charge.

"Sound a defensive posture," Lord Marshal Yenga shouted to the hornsman. "We stand here and fight."

The hornsman blew his horn loudly, and the call was quickly picked up by other hornsman throughout the line. Slowly the charge faltered as the Khadorans formed a tight defensive line that was impenetrable. The plan was to remain in position for as long as the Motangans continued to attack. Once the attack abated, the Khadorans would move forward slowly, crushing the Motangans between themselves and the Fakarans.

* * *

Harmagan led the Jiadin charge through the mass of Motangan soldiers. He constantly shot a glance far to his right where Blaka was leading the free tribes on a parallel course. Whenever Blaka appeared to move ahead of Harmagan, the Jiadin leader shouted a war cry to urge his men onward.

"Quit fighting like old maids," shouted Harmagan. "Do you want the free tribes to get there before you?"

A thousand negative shouts answered Harmagan, and the big man's face broke into a wide grin. He slapped the rump of his horse with the flat of his long blade, and the stallion surged forward. Standing erect in his stirrups, the Jiadin leader flew past the Jiadin vanguard, leaning far to one side to sever the head of a Motangan soldier. The move of the Jiadin leader was inspiring to his men. Before Harmagan could attack the next Motangan, scores of Jiadin surged

past him to engage the enemy. Over the din of battle, Harmagan heard distant shouts. He turned to his right once again and saw Blaka driving the free tribes hard into the red-clad Motangans. Harmagan howled with laughter as Blaka refused to let the Jiadin reach the temple first.

Several Jiadin near Harmagan fell from their horses, but the leader hardly noticed. The Jiadin lived and died on the back of their mounts, and to die in battle was to die a natural death. As he struck down another Motangan hellsoul, Harmagan felt as if this was the very moment for which he had been born.

* * *

"Harmagan is crazy," shouted Yojji, the leader of the Kheri tribe. "Does he think this is a race?"

"He is not crazy," Blaka responded as he glanced to the left and saw Harmagan take the lead of the Jiadin. "He is a true Jiadin, not one of those villagers that they kidnapped and raised to fight."

"You sound as though you admire him," frowned Yojji. "It was not long ago that he was your sworn enemy."

"It is not that I admire him," corrected the leader of the Extala tribe. "It is that I respect him. He is not leading the Jiadin against defenseless villagers today. He is crushing invaders from across the sea, and he is our ally now."

Blaka leaned far out to the right and sliced through the neck of a Motangan soldier while Yojji mirrored the maneuver to his left. The red-clad soldiers fell to the ground, their bodies immediately trampled by hundreds of hooves.

"And it is a race," grinned Blaka, "one that I will not let the Jiadin win."

The words were barely spoken before Blaka surged forward to pass the forwardmost riders of the free tribes. Yojji shook his head in amusement and quickly followed. The leader of the Kheri tribe turned briefly and saw the gap left behind. A wicked smile crossed his lips. He raised a horn to his lips and a long, shrill note blared out. The sound was immediately echoed by a hundred horns throughout the free tribes.

"What are you doing?" chuckled Blaka. "Why call a charge? We are already charging."

"Well," grinned Yojji, "we are not charging fast enough. If this is a race, I will be blasted if I intend to let the Jiadin win. Move aside. You are slowing me down."

Blaka laughed as Yojji pulled up alongside him. Together the two tribal leaders surged forward to take the lead once again.

* * *

The dragon swooped into the mass of red-clad soldiers yet again.

Arrows soared up to meet her, but they bounced off her armored scales. Flames belched from her snout, and her claws extended out before her as she attacked. Some of the Motangans tried to harm her with their swords, but most of them panicked and ran. Myka cackled as she snared two Motangans, one head in each claw. The dragon shot upwards so that she was clearly visible to the Motangan host before she shook the heads until the bodies separated and fell to the ground. Thousands of upturned faces screamed in horror as Myka tilted her wings and fell into another dive.

After a dozen more dives, Myka saw the Khadorans halt their advance. She circled lazily while she observed the battlefield. The Jiadin and the free tribes were racing towards the temple, and most of the Motangans were fleeing towards the Khadorans. What disturbed the dragon was the large number of red-clad soldiers running into the temple. That was not part of the plan, and the dragon broke out of her circling and sped eastward. Her keen eyes swept over the charging free tribes until she located the elves and Chula behind them. Diving steeply, the dragon sped downward and landed before the elven king.

"Motangans are entering the temple in large numbers," reported the dragon.

"How close are the Fakarans?" asked King Avalar.

"They are closing swiftly," answered Myka, "but it will still be some time before they can reach the temple. Maybe a half-hour. The Khadorans have already halted to give the Motangans room to gather before the clamp gets tightened."

The elven king turned to the head shaman of the Zatong tribe. "Can you get us to the temple ahead of the Fakarans?" he asked.

"How many of you?" asked Ukaro.

"Myself," frowned King Avalar, "and my two daughters."

"Axor?" the Torak's father asked. "Rykoma? Will you two join me?"

The two shamans stepped forward and nodded solemnly. All three shamans shimmered for a moment and then disappeared. Seconds later, three large tigers appeared in their place. King Avalar waved the two elven princesses over and nodded towards the tigers.

"See if you can dissuade some of the Motangans from entering the temple," King Avalar said to the dragon. "We will be there shortly."

The dragon nodded silently and leaped into the air. King Avalar mounted one of the tigers and immediately nocked an arrow to his bow. Princess Alahara and Princess Alastasia mimicked their father's moves.

"Why bows?" asked Princess Alahara as the cats sprung to life and raced towards the temple. "Wouldn't light blades be more appropriate?"

“Light blades may travel through the Motangans and hit some of the Fakarans,” explained the elven king. “We do not need to decapitate the Motangans that we will meet along the way. We just need to keep them away from us while we get to the temple door. If they rise again, someone else will take care of them.”

Princess Alahara nodded thoughtfully as the three tigers started loping westward. Within minutes the tigers were racing along the tyrik web wall that surrounded the skeletons. Hundreds of the trapped skeletons were stuck to the web, and others were trying to climb over it without touching it. Princess Alahara shuddered in disgust and looked away.

King Avalar took the lead as the group started riding single file along the web barrier. The Fakarans ahead of them had kept away from the web for fear of getting stuck, but it appeared that they had managed to kill the Motangans along the edge of their route. The tigers leaped over decapitated bodies without breaking stride, and they soon caught up to the tail end of the Fakaran horsemen. The elven king watched as the Fakarans ahead of him leaned far out of their saddles to strike at the Motangans trying to hug the web. Several Motangan hellsouls were stuck to the outside of the web. The tigers nimbly avoided contact with the stuck Motangans.

As the tigers drew parallel with the vanguard of the Fakarans, King Avalar raised his bow. The elven king fired as fast as he could nock arrows, and his daughters joined in, but it was impossible to kill all of the Motangans in their path. The lead tiger leaped into the air and pounced on a Motangan who had managed to survive the withering volley of elven arrows. The large cat pushed out with its forepaws, knocking the hellsoul to the ground, and continued onward. The following cats leaped over the fallen body before it could rise. Several more Motangans were bowled over by the tigers and soon the elves were clear of the conflict. The Motangans between them and the temple were fleeing to the west or into the temple.

Myka stood on the steps of the temple, flames pouring out of her mouth as red-clad soldiers tried to race around her. Her tail was constantly whipping from side to side, and each movement swept Motangans to the ground. The dragon’s claws streaked outward and grabbed soldiers and snapped their heads off, but the red-clad soldiers still raced towards her.

“They think they can overwhelm her,” shouted King Avalar.

“They probably can,” replied Princess Alastasia. “She can only do so much, and to remain outside the temple is certain death for the Motangans. What is our plan?”

“We will seal the entrance,” King Avalar replied as the tigers raced up the steps towards the dragon.

The large cats raced through a sea of red uniforms, but there was little combat as the Motangans were fleeing. It was only when the elves reached the doorway to the temple that the hellsouls realized the danger. Myka swayed to one side to allow the tigers to pass by her huge body and then she immediately resumed her position. The tigers raced through the doorway and immediately halted. The elves leaped off the backs of the cats, ready to fire upon soldiers inside the temple, but there were none in sight, although their shouting and pounding footsteps could be heard coming from farther within the temple. King Avalar raced to the edge of the doorway and knelt down. He studied the darkness for several moments before he found what he was looking for.

"Scraggly weeds," the elven king said with distaste, "but it is better than nothing. A sturdy vine stock would have been too much to ask for. Join me, daughters."

The elven princesses ran forward and began to cast spells on the weeds. So intent was their concentration that they were unaware of the Motangan soldiers overwhelming the dragon and surging towards the doorway. Unexpectedly, magical projectiles streamed over the heads of the conjuring elves, and red-clad bodies began flying backwards away from the doorway. King Avalar glanced over his shoulder and saw the three Chula shamans in their human form. The shamans stood at angles to the doorway so that their spells would not impact the dragon if they missed. The elven king smiled inwardly and returned to his spell casting. Within minutes the scraggly weeds had grown thick and strong, and crisscrossed the doorway from top to bottom, but the elves continued casting.

"We can no longer keep them away without damaging what you have done," announced Ukaro. "They are already hacking at your weed with their swords."

King Avalar nodded wordlessly and continued his magic spell. Even as the Motangans sliced through strands of the weeds, the plants grew stronger and more numerous. Minutes later, light ceased to pass through the doorway, the entire opening covered in a mass of thick vegetation. The elves stood up and ceased their casting, their foreheads damp from the strenuous weaving of magic.

"Will it hold?" asked Ukaro.

"They could eventually cut through it," shrugged King Avalar, "but I doubt that the Fakarans will allow them time to accomplish it. The hellsouls will soon realize that they must stand and fight. There will be no fleeing from this battlefield."

"We must do something about the ones who already got into the temple," remarked Princess Alastasia. "They must not be allowed to aid Vand in his battle against the Three."

“Our people were supposed to enter through that door,” frowned Princess Alahara. “Now we have sealed them out.”

“Not entirely,” smiled King Avalar. “There is a balcony on the second level facing east. We shall create a plant ladder for our people to use. If our Chula friends will join us,” the elven king continued, “we will begin that process now. The sooner we can get our people inside, the quicker we can eliminate the hellsouls already here.”

* * *

Emperor Marak looked down the corridor and saw no one. Using a hand signal to warn Lyra and Rejji to stay back a bit, the Torak eased his body against the wall and peered around the corner. There was a large open area with two staircases descending to the lower levels. He saw Lady Mystic on the far staircase. She was hurrying down the stairs. No one else was in sight. The Torak stepped around the corner and saw Xavo hurrying down the closer staircase.

“Xavo and Lady Mystic are both heading downward,” the Torak said softly. “I suspect that is where Pakar’s men must have gone.”

There was a large urn positioned next to a stone railing half way between the staircases. As Marak turned his head towards Lyra, his peripheral vision caught sight of the urn, and it was in the process of disappearing. In its place stood one of Pakar’s mages. Shouting a warning to his friends, the Torak dove for the floor. A magical projectile flew just over his head as Marak rolled into a ball. Marak came out of the roll and immediately tossed a light blade towards the enemy mage. The spell impacted a shield and dissipated. Marak dove again as the black-cloak threw another spell at him.

Lyra stepped around the corner and pointed her fist at the enemy mage.

“He is shielded,” Marak shouted as he tried to keep moving.

Knowing that Lyra did not have time to erect her blue cylinder, Marak charged towards the black-cloak in an attempt to draw attention away from the Star of Sakova. The enemy mage wavered for just an instant, but it was long enough for Lyra to strike. A powerful force bolt sped from Lyra’s fist and smashed into the enemy’s shield. While the mage’s shield prevented the force bolt from reaching him, it did not quite absorb the spell either.

Lyra’s magical spell hit with such force that the black-cloak’s shield was forcibly pushed backwards, carrying the mage with it. Marak watched in awe as the mage in his shield was pushed through the stone railing and over the edge of the top level of the temple. The black-cloak’s scream faded as he plummeted down to the ground level. Marak raced to the gaping hole in the railing and looked down into the atrium. The black-cloak’s body was splattered on the ground floor many levels below.

“I didn’t know that you could do that,” Marak gasped as Lyra walked up alongside him.

“I didn’t either,” admitted the Star of Sakova. “His shield actually held. There is a lesson to be learned in this.”

“Be careful where you stand when you choose to oppose the Star of Sakova,” quipped Marak. “This one was disguised as an urn. I was lucky to have seen him transforming. How are we ever going to find all of them?”

“Maybe we shouldn’t try to,” interjected Rejji.

“We cannot afford any interruptions when we go up against Vand,” retorted Marak. “Not only are there six more mages to account for, but I saw Motangan soldiers flowing in through the front door down there.”

“I understand,” nodded the Astor, “but with Lyra’s power, we can isolate this level.”

“Destroy the two staircases?” questioned the Star of Sakova.

“Exactly,” nodded Rejji. “We know that Xavo and Lady Mystic are already safely down on the next level. We can destroy the staircases and then systematically search this level to make sure that Vand is alone. Let the others deal with the black-cloaks.”

“What do you think?” Lyra asked Marak. “It makes sense to me.”

“I agree,” nodded the Torak. “The fact that Xavo and Lady Mystic hurried downstairs tells me that they saw the black-cloaks descending. There are probably not any more up here, but we will check every room first before entering the throne room.”

“Not every room,” Lyra shook her head. “We are not to enter Dobuk’s domain.”

“Why not?” frowned Rejji. “He too must be destroyed.”

“No,” objected Lyra. “It is not within the power of man to destroy the Great Demon.”

“Are you sure about this?” questioned the Torak. “Vand is only a puppet of Dobuk. If we leave the demon intact, he will merely replace Vand with another.”

“That may be,” shrugged Lyra, “but remember the words of Kaltara. Vand is a man and his destruction is within the realm of man, but Dobuk is in the realm of Kaltara.”

“And beyond our reach,” nodded the Torak. “You are right, Lyra. Let’s destroy the staircases and search the rest of this level. I do not want to give Vand a chance to escape.”

Lyra nodded and gazed across the atrium at the staircase that Lady Mystic had descended. She clasped her hands together and aimed them at the staircase. The air rippled and distorted as the huge force bolt sped towards the stairs. When it contacted the far staircase, the stairs exploded in a frenzy of flying rock. Chunks of rock shot

upward and downward and a cloud of fine dust hung in the air. Slowly the cloud dropped downward revealing a massive gaping hole in the side of the temple. The staircase no longer existed above the level below them.

"Merciful Kaltara!" exclaimed Rejji. "You blew a hole in the side of the temple."

"Perhaps you should conserve your energy on the closer staircase," frowned Marak. "We don't want the temple collapsing beneath us."

"And let's move farther away before you cast your spell," added Rejji. "I don't want to get hit by flying rocks."

Lyra nodded sheepishly, her face turning red in embarrassment as the Three moved away from the remaining staircase.

"I guess that was a little too much power," she said softly, "but I never tried to destroy stone stairs before."

Marak chuckled under his breath as Lyra's arms rose once again. Her second force bolt completely obliterated the stone staircase coming up from the next lower level, but it did not punch a hole in the wall of the temple. The Three waited for the cloud of dust to settle to make sure that the top level was isolated before turning to search for black-cloaks.

* * *

Three levels below the throne room, Lady Mystic walked openly down the center of the corridor as if she were merely taking a stroll. While she may have appeared merely lost in thought to most observers, she was in fact concentrating on maintaining the most powerful shield she was capable of creating. When the attack came, it was hardly unexpected. One of Pakar's mages dropped his illusion of a statue and sent a fiery projectile at the Emperor's daughter. The missile struck Lady Mystic's shield and disappeared.

"Clumsy," scolded Lady Mystic as she turned casually to face her attacker. "You are more skilled than to waste such energy without first testing for the presence of a shield."

"It was expedient," shrugged the black-cloak. "Had I caught you unawares, you would not be talking so calmly now."

"True," smiled Lady Mystic as she sent a small fireball towards her adversary and confirmed the existence of his shield. "It is possible that you could have caught me unawares as Pakar caught Xavo, but I am not so foolish as to walk around unprotected. Shall we play?"

"All I have to do is wait you out," the mage retorted confidently. "My brothers will be along in a moment, and I won't have to waste any more power on you."

"You seem to have things backward," laughed Lady Mystic. "Your brothers are all dead. They will never come to your aid again, just as

Xavo can no longer come to mine. It is just you and me."

The black-cloak frowned with disbelief.

"Oh," smiled Lady Mystic. "Did I forget to mention the hundreds of Chula and elven mages who are approaching this temple as we speak?"

"Their skill can never match ours," balked the black-cloak, "but you are wise to realize that you need help to defeat me."

"Help?" laughed Lady Mystic. "Do not bore me. Your skill is nowhere near mine. Your powers are puny compared to the Emperor's daughter."

"You wish," the black-cloak replied with confidence. "Only your shields are saving your life right now. And you cannot hold them up forever."

"You overrate yourself," Lady Mystic said smugly. "I could drop my shield entirely and give you the first cast and still defeat you. You are nothing."

"Try me," taunted the black-cloak.

"Fine," glared Lady Mystic as she dropped her shield, "but I warn you. You had better kill me with your first cast, or it is you who will die."

The black-cloak grinned victoriously as he summoned his power. He sent a tiny projectile out and verified that the Emperor's daughter had indeed dropped her shield. As Lady Mystic stood unprotected and seemingly uncaring, the black-cloak inhaled deeply as he felt the power build within him. As he extended his arm towards Lady Mystic, the air around him blossomed with light. He turned swiftly towards the light. His mouth opened in surprise as the blades of light sliced through his neck and his body crumbled to the ground.

"You take too many chances," Xavo scowled at Lady Mystic. "He could have struck you when he tested for your shields."

"I read him correctly," shrugged Lady Mystic. "He always was a proud, pompous fool. He probably really thought he could beat me in a fair fight."

"We will never know," chuckled Xavo. "Fair fights are not on the agenda today. How did you know that he would drop his shields before he attacked you?"

"I gave him one free shot at me," smiled Lady Mystic. "He had to make it his best, and that meant abandoning his shields to harvest their power. Let's go find another one."

"There are not many left," replied Xavo. "My daughter just sent one tumbling down from the top level."

"How did we miss him?" frowned Lady Mystic.

The sound of an explosion interrupted the conversation before Xavo could answer. He quickly erected a shield around himself and

signaled for Lady Mystic to do the same. Together they rushed toward the center of the temple where the atrium rose up through the levels. As they slid to a halt near the atrium, a shower of rock debris drifted downward. Xavo peered through the cloud of particles at the hole in the side of the temple far above him. While he was trying to make sense out of what he was seeing, another explosion rocked the building. Xavo grabbed Lady Mystic and shoved her into the corridor just before more rock debris fell from above."

"What is going on?" questioned the Emperor's daughter.

"Lyra just destroyed the stairs to the top level," answered Xavo.

"The fool," protested Lady Mystic. "Doesn't she know that Vand derives his power from Dobuk? If we are not there to battle the Great Demon, my father will destroy the Three with ease. How are we going to get back up there?"

"I don't know," sighed Xavo, "but we must find a way. We have not come this far to let your father kill my daughter. We must get to Dobuk, and quickly."

Chapter 49

Tea with a God

The elves and Chula scrambled up the strong vines leading to the second-level balcony. King Avalar stood inside the library and directed everyone to an appropriate part of the temple as they entered. With nearly three thousand warriors and mages inside the temple, the elven king felt sure that they would find all of the hidden Motangans and vanquish them. One of the last to climb the vine was Bakhai, the Astor's brother.

"How is the war outside going?" asked the elven king.

"It goes well," answered Bakhai. "The remaining hellsouls are being crushed between the Khadorans and the Fakarans not far to the west. It should be over in a few hours. The area around the temple is now solidly in our hands."

"And soon the inside of the temple will be as well," nodded King Avalar.

"Unless Vand has more surprises in store for us," agreed Bakhai. "The skeletons continue to try to get out of the tyrik-web pens that they are trapped in. It will be dangerous when we finally turn our attention to them."

"Is there a danger of them escaping?" the elven king asked with concern.

"Not in the immediate future," Bakhai shook his head. "They are trying to climb over the bones of their comrades without coming into contact with the web, but I think it is impossible for them to get free. I have ordered our few remaining tyriks to keep watch on them. They will spin higher webs if it looks like the skeletons might escape."

"Then what is your concern?" asked King Avalar.

"Sooner or later we must destroy the creatures," explained the Qubari shaman. "It is not likely that such creatures can be starved to death, so that means that our warriors will have to enter the pens to separate their heads from their bodies. I would not volunteer to be one of those chosen warriors."

"I understand," the elven king nodded thoughtfully. "We will discuss how to accomplish that task after the hellsouls are defeated. Our main concern now is making sure the temple is safe. We have three thousand elves and Chula searching every section of the building."

Several levels above the library, Princess Alastasia led a group of

elves in search of Motangan hellsouls. As her small group emerged from a corridor she saw a black-cloak moving stealthily in her direction. The Motangan mage recognized the danger of the chance encounter and turned to flee, but two other black-cloaks suddenly appeared and blocked his path of retreat.

"You are all that is left, Pakar," scowled Lady Mystic. "Drop your shield, and you will enjoy a swift death; resist and you will be crushed brutally."

While Lady Mystic threatened Pakar, Xavo's eyes locked onto Princess Alastasia's face. He quickly pulled back his hood to show his face, even though he realized that she might not recognize him.

"MistyTrail," Xavo shouted, "You know me as Malafar. Stand clear while we deal with Vand's head mage."

Princess Alastasia smiled and nodded. "We met in Vandamar," replied the elven princess. "We will stay and watch this duel of magicians."

Pakar was confused about the relationship between the elf and Xavo, but he harbored no puzzlement regarding his course of action. He had to destroy Lady Mystic and Xavo and flee the temple. Both arms rose instantly, one pointing at Lady Mystic and the other at Xavo. Flames flew from his fingertips, but both of the other mages were shielded, and all the flames did was to illuminate the outline of those shields. Pakar sneered at the Emperor's daughter, knowing that her energy was almost spent. He could see in the outline of her shield that her power was running out.

"You have taken on too much, too quickly," he snarled at Lady Mystic. "You shall be the first to fall to my powers."

Without letting Xavo move outside his field of vision, Pakar concentrated on the Emperor's daughter. His spells flew from his fingertips in an almost steady stream designed to destroy her shield and strike her down. Lady Mystic did not retaliate as she urged all of her power into strengthening her shields. She knew that Pakar was the strongest mage on the Island of Darkness besides Vand himself, and she was not about to leave herself defenseless.

Xavo stood next to Lady Mystic, seemingly doing nothing to interfere, but a strong cold wind began to whip around the atrium behind Pakar. Princess Alastasia felt the chill immediately as her body shivered involuntarily. At first she wondered where the chill breeze had come from, but then she remembered the stories told in Star City. She remembered how Master Malafar had overcome the Katana's strong shields. He had used lightning to outline the shields and make them visible. He had then used sound to shrink the shields and cold wind to cause the shields to turn brittle. The princess stared past Pakar and made eye contact with Lyra's father.

“Let me help,” the princess mouthed silently when Xavo finally acknowledged her with his eyes.

Xavo merely smiled with an almost imperceptible nod of his head. Princess Alastasia knew that Xavo was building his ice storm to attack Pakar’s shields, so she had to do something to make them visible and constrict them. She smiled broadly as she took a seed from her pouch and unobtrusively tossed it near Pakar’s feet.

The elven princess concentrated on the seed and shut everything else out of her mind. Instantly the seed sprouted to life, and a tiny vine began to grow. Alastasia directed the growth of the vine, causing it to encircle Pakar’s shield at the floor level, its tiny web-like stems spreading out like a slowly shattering pane of glass. She concentrated hard to restrict the vine to the shield around the lower half of Pakar’s body. She did not want the mage to be aware of what was happening.

As Xavo’s ice storm grew in intensity just beyond the railing, Princess Alastasia directed the growth of the vine up the back of Pakar’s shield. The black-cloak’s face distorted in rage as he continued to blast away at Lady Mystic’s shield. Alastasia glanced over at Vand’s daughter and saw her shield glowing with energy. Tiny lightning flashes crackled across the surface of the otherwise invisible shield, and the elven princess knew that there was not much time left. She made deliberate eye contact with Xavo, and he nodded noticeably with a sense of urgency.

Princess Alastasia returned her full attention to the rapidly growing vine and suddenly the vine spread all over Pakar’s shield. The black-cloak’s spell casting immediately halted as he sensed the danger inherent in the plant growth covering his shield. As he turned to look at the elven princess, Xavo directed his wintry gale across the railing and onto Pakar’s shield. The shield immediately turned a frosty white, becoming opaque. Princess Alastasia ordered the vines to constrict, and they exerted tremendous pressure as the stems intertwined and tightened rapidly.

Lady Mystic immediately dropped her shield and brought her coupled hands out in front of her. A surge of power shot from her fists and smashed into the frosty, vine-covered shield of Pakar. The shield shattered like a wine goblet hitting a stone floor. Xavo was ready with a force bolt of his own as the shield shattered. He directed the energy at the now unprotected black-cloak, and Pakar’s body flew backward through the railing, with a large hole in what used to be the man’s chest. Pakar’s body dropped silently down to the ground level of the atrium.

“That was close,” Lady Mystic sighed with relief. “Too close.”

“He was a powerful mage,” nodded Xavo, “and the last of Vand’s mages.”

“Are you sure?” asked Princess Alastasia.

“I am sure,” nodded Xavo.

“Well,” smiled Princess Alastasia as she signaled for her group to continue hunting for Motangans, “then you two can rest while we clean up the hellsouls.”

“Wait,” Xavo said softly as his hand reached out and stopped the elven princess from following her group. “We need your help.”

“You need healing?” Alastasia asked with concern.

“Not healing,” Xavo shook his head. “Lyra destroyed the staircases to the uppermost level. We need your help in getting up there. Can you create one of those vines that will be strong enough for us to climb?”

“Easily,” nodded the elven princess, “but I do not understand. I thought the Three had to meet Vand alone. I fear what may happen if you two try to interfere.”

“We do not plan to interfere with the Three,” promised Lyra’s father. “We have other business on the top level.”

“It will have to wait,” Alastasia shook her head. “If it was alright for others to interfere in the final battle, every one of us would be rushing to get up there, but Marak warned us against that. Vand can use the presence of others to diminish the skills of the Three. I cannot help you.”

“Tell her the truth,” scowled Lady Mystic. “Time is slipping away from us.”

Princess Alastasia frowned at Lady Mystic’s outburst and stared into Xavo’s eyes. She waited for Lyra’s father to explain.

“Alright,” sighed Xavo. “We do not plan to interfere with the battle directly, but we can help the Three win another way.”

“How?” Princess Alastasia asked skeptically.

“Vand derives his power from Dobuk,” explained Xavo. “If Lady Mystic and I can attack Dobuk while Lyra and Marak are fighting Vand, we can lessen the power available to Vand. It just might make the difference between failure and success.”

“No one can fight Dobuk,” Princess Alastasia shook her head. “It is certain death even to try.”

“We are aware of that,” Lady Mystic interjected, “but even the Great Demon must expend power to vanquish us.”

“I have been in his presence before,” Xavo quickly added. “I think we can make him expend quite a bit of energy before he kills us.”

“You are both crazy,” balked Alastasia.

“Perhaps,” smiled Xavo, “but it is my daughter in that room with Vand. I want her to live through this battle. Help us.”

Princess Alastasia stared at the two mage in disbelief for several minutes. Finally, she smiled with tears forming in her eyes and

nodded in agreement.

"Let's hurry before I change my mind," Alastasia said softly.

* * *

"Not that door," warned Rejji. "That is where Dobuk resides."

Marak and Lyra immediately halted and then slowly backed away from the door.

"That is the end then," Marak remarked. "The only doors left are the ones to the throne room."

"None of Pakar's mages remained on this level," declared the Star of Sakova. "It is time to confront Vand and end this completely."

"There are three doors to the throne room," Rejji pointed out. "Should we each take one?"

"I think Lyra and I should enter through the main door," stated the Torak. "That will put us as far away from Vand as possible when we enter. I want to see what he tries to do, and the distance may help protect us."

"I will give you time to enter," nodded Rejji, "and then I will come in one of the side doors. Maybe my entry will distract Vand a bit."

"Be careful," warned Lyra. "Your lack of magical skills may make you Vand's first target."

Rejji nodded as Lyra and Marak departed. The Torak and the Star walked the long corridor along the throne room and emerged at the front doors. Marak hesitated as his hand nervously moved to open the door.

"Use your blue cylinder inside," advised the Torak.

Lyra nodded and Marak threw open the door and burst into the room. Lyra followed closely on his heels and immediately summoned her spell of protection. The blue cylinder blazed to life as Lyra moved into the room. At the far end of the room, Emperor Vand sat calmly on his throne.

"I was expecting three of you," Vand said as if he had offered invitations for a social gathering. "Approach."

Marak's brow creased in confusion, and he shot a glance at the Star of Sakova. His eyes scanned the room looking for traps or concealed assistants, but the room was fairly empty. There was a table at the foot of the stairs leading up to the throne, and three chairs sat before it. In the far corner of the large room was a little girl holding a silver tray with four silver cups upon it.

"Come," urged Vand. "Come and sit down, and let us discuss our differences over a cup of tea."

Lyra and Marak exchanged puzzled glances. It was not the type of reception that they had planned on. At that moment, the side door opened near the little girl, and Rejji walked into the room holding his

staff.

"Ah," smiled Vand, "the Astor has come after all. Your companions were just about to sit down and have some tea. Why don't you join them?"

"What game are you playing?" Marak asked brusquely. "We have not come to socialize with you, and I am certain that you realize that."

"Have it your way then," grinned the Motangan Emperor as he waved his hand slightly.

There was neither a clap of thunder nor a flash of light as the result of Vand's spell casting. It took a moment for Marak to understand what the spell had accomplished. Where the three doors to the throne had existed, there was nothing but solid walls. There was no way in or out of the throne room.

"There is still time for tea before we start this unfortunate business," smiled Vand as he indicated to the little girl to serve the refreshments.

As the little girl passed in front of Rejji, his staff grew hot to the touch. His brow knitted with confusion, and he shook his head in puzzlement. He stared at the little girl for a moment and then moved swiftly in reaction to the warning given by the staff. The Astor swung his staff hard at the little girl's head. As Lyra gasped in surprise, the little girl's body hit the floor hard and slid along it. Vand started laughing, and the little girl bellowed in rage, her voice low and thundering. Before the eyes of the Three, the little girl's body instantly transformed in a giant demon.

"Zarapeto!" exclaimed Marak as he drew the Sword of Torak and moved cautiously towards the demon.

"I see you have come to know my pets," grinned Vand. "There will be no dragon to help you this time, Torak. Come, demonstrate your skills for me. I am eager to watch you fight."

Rejji approached the demon from behind, and Zarapeto turned quickly to snare the Astor.

"Not the Fakaran," admonished Vand. "I have need of him, and he is no threat to me. Kill the Torak."

Zarapeto snarled and spat in the Emperor's direction. The acidic spittle landed on the table and began to smoke as it ate through the wood.

"He seems to have little respect for you," Marak taunted Vand. "I guess that is a feeling that everyone in this rooms shares."

"Then everyone in this room will have to be eliminated," Vand growled loudly.

Zarapeto shot a glance of disgust in Vand's direction, and Marak saw his opening. The Torak dove towards the demon, rolling in a ball and coming to his feet directly in front of the large creature. The move

was sudden, and the demon stepped back in surprise, but not before the Sword of Torak sliced into his leg.

Rejji raced forward and swung his staff hard behind the demon's knees. The demon's legs buckled as the creature tried to turn around and grab Rejji. Marak leaped up onto the demon's bent thigh and shoved his sword upward. The sword punctured the demon's throat, and Zarapeto's scream was a loud gurgle. As the demon straightened his legs and reached for his throat, Marak was thrown to the floor, the Sword of Torak slipping from his grasp and skittering away.

Zarapeto kicked out with his foot towards Marak, and the Torak rolled swiftly away from the sharp claws. Lyra moved quickly to put herself between the demon and Marak, figuring that her blue cylinder would maim Zarapeto. The demon stopped long enough to turn and bash Rejji with the back of his hand. The Astor flew through the air, fell to the floor, and slid along the tile until he collided with a wall. Marak scrambled for his sword while the Star of Sakova stood blocking the demon's path.

Zarapeto snarled in pain as he slowly approached Lyra, black blood flowing from the wound in his neck. He stretched his clawed hand out before him and reached for Lyra's head as if he were prepared to crush a grape. Lyra trembled, but she stood her ground to give Marak time to rearm himself. When Zarapeto's hand reached through the protective blue cylinder, Lyra screamed and shuffled backwards. Vand laughed loudly.

"Zarapeto exists in another plane," chuckled Vand. "Your puny spell of protection has no effect on him."

As the demon closed in on the Star of Sakova, Marak snatched the Sword of Torak and raced towards the demon.

"Drop the spell," Marak shouted to Lyra, "and move away."

The blue cylinder winked out immediately as Lyra turned and raced towards the wall. Zarapeto was struck with a moment of indecision as he wondered whether to pursue the Star of Sakova or the charging Torak. Lyra was closer, and the demon made up his mind. He turned and stretched out his arm to snare Lyra. Marak launched himself into a dive, his sword stretched out before him. The Sword of Torak struck the demon's wrist and imbedded deeply. Zarapeto wailed and pulled his arm in close to his body, causing the Torak to lose his grip on the sword and tumble to the floor weaponless.

The demon howled as he shook his arm to rid it of the imbedded sword. Rejji picked himself up off the floor and shook his head to clear his vision. Stars danced before his eyes, but he could see well enough to know that Lyra and Marak needed his help. He grabbed his staff and raced up behind the demon. He ran swiftly and shoved the end of the staff into the back of Zarapeto's knee. The demon tottered

for a moment, and Rejji struck the other leg. Zarapeto fell to his knees, still shaking his arm and staring at the Sword of Torak as if wanting it gone, but afraid to touch it with his free hand.

Lyra saw a chance to strike and took it. She pulled out her rapier and ran towards the demon's face. Before Zarapeto could register the threat, Lyra shoved the rapier into the demon's right eye. Zarapeto's head reared back in anguish as Marak rose and grabbed the hilt of the Sword of Torak. He pulled the sword free and swung it at the wounded hand. As the creature's hand fell to the floor, the demon thrashed in agony. One flailing arm caught Lyra in the chest and sent her sprawling. The handless arm swung towards Marak, but he ducked under it and shoved the Sword of Torak into the demon's side. Rejji struck repeatedly at the back of the demon with his staff, but Zarapeto appeared not to notice, the pain in his side overwhelming everything else.

"Switch," shouted Marak as he pulled on the Sword of Torak and rolled free of the demon.

Rejji nodded and moved around to Zarapeto's side. He shoved the tip of the staff deep into the wound and moved it around. The demon's wounded arm flailed around, but it could not reach the Astor. While Rejji was infuriating the demon, Marak moved behind the creature and swung hard at its exposed legs. The Sword of Torak sliced deep into the demon's leg and black blood flowed freely onto the floor. The Torak moved quickly to the other leg and sliced it open. With an inhuman scream, Zarapeto threw his body forward and crashed to the floor. Marak immediately marched onto the demon's back and shoved the Sword of Torak deep into the back of the demon's head. The creature thrashed about for several seconds and then fell still.

"Bravo," congratulated Vand with mocking applause. "You have shown great skill in defeating a moronic creature. Now that you have had your fun, let the real contest begin."

Chapter 50

Offer for the Astor

The Astor, the Torak, and the Star of Sakova turned to stare at Emperor Vand as if he were mad. The ageless man still sat calmly on his throne where he had just watched the battle resulting in the death of his last demon. He acted as if he hadn't a care in the world.

Without warning, a fireball suddenly screamed towards Lyra, and Rejji shouted a warning, but it was unnecessary. Lyra instantly erected her blue cylinder, and the magical projectile was instantly absorbed. Another fireball headed towards Marak, but the Torak dove to the floor, and the projectile impacted on the body of the dead demon where it produced no damage. Vand laughed hysterically.

"If you two are merely going to stay protected and wait for me to die," cackled Vand, "you should be aware that I will never die. I am a god. I do not even require food or water. A waiting game is not in your best interests. No one will enter or leave this room until I allow it. Drop the shield, Star of Sakova. You cannot cast against me while you hide within it, and that demon will decompose soon. Enough, Torak, come show me the spells that your mother taught you."

Rejji froze. He knew that he could not reach the safety of the demon's body before Vand struck him down, but strangely, the Motangan Emperor ignored him.

"Come stand before me and receive my judgment," Vand said to Lyra and Marak.

"You are finished, Vand," retorted Lyra. "The armies you sent to the Sakova and Khadora are defeated, as is the army sent to find Angragar. Your army of the dead is imprisoned, and your hellsouls are being decapitated as we speak. Your demons are dead, and Pakar and his mages are as well. It is you who should kneel and beg Kaltara for forgiveness."

"Beg Kaltara?" Vand balked. "What a ludicrous thought. The armies that I sent out were expendable, as were the demons. They are not what this battle is about. Those were just things to keep you occupied and to make sure that you arrived here for this confrontation. It is this meeting that will decide the future of this world, and nothing else matters. I have waited thousands of years for the Torak to be born, just so I could defeat him, and I will defeat him. There is nothing that Kaltara can do to interfere."

"I don't believe you," countered the Star of Sakova. "We have

beat you on every other field of battle, and we will beat you here today."

Vand laughed wickedly. "You are a feisty one, Star of Sakova," he chuckled. "I shall enjoy watching you suffer."

"You will have to kill me first," declared Marak. "It is me that you are after. Grab a sword and let us fight this like men."

"You, Torak," sneered Vand as he flicked his wrist towards Marak, "are nothing."

Marak was suddenly lifted off the floor and magically shoved backward until he struck the wall. He stuck to the wall, a pace above the floor, as if held by a huge invisible hand. Marak struggled, but he could not move.

"It disturbs me that Kaltara made me wait thousands of years and then presented me such a feeble challenger," Vand shook his head with disgust. "I could kill you right now, but your god must learn to respect my powers. First I will dispose of the Star of Sakova. You will be able to watch and wonder what your own death will feel like."

Marak gritted his teeth and tried to force himself away from the wall, but he could not move.

"I well know the powers of each of you," Vand continued, "and you are no match for me. That is what you get for following a fool of a god. Kaltara endowed you with powers that could have defeated me two thousand years ago, but I am not the same person I was then. I have grown with Dobuk's help. Try me, Torak."

Vand flicked his wrist again, and Marak tumbled to the floor, the invisible hand no longer restraining him. The Torak did not hesitate. He nodded to Lyra and then charged towards Vand with the Sword of Torak held before him. Lyra dropped her spell that maintained the blue cylinder and brought her fists together, pointing at Vand. A tremendous surge of power shot from Lyra's fists and headed for Vand while Marak jumped over the table and prepared to sever Vand's head.

Vand merely grinned at the dual attack. With a slight wave of his hand, a dozen demons suddenly appeared between Vand and the Torak. Lyra's force bolt reached Vand and instantly disappeared. Her mouth hung open in awe when she saw that there was no outline of a shield shown by the dissipating spell.

Marak faltered and halted his advance to battle the first of the demons. He acted as if he planned to run right past the demon, but at the last minute he pivoted and slashed out at the creature's leg. The sword slashed clear through the image, and the Torak realized that he was attacking illusions. Lyra tossed a light blade at Vand and immediately summoned her blue cylinder. She watched as the light blade disappeared, again showing no trace of a shield around Vand.

Vand cackled and slapped his hand on his thigh.

"That was clever," the disciple of Dobuk chuckled, "but rather ineffective, wouldn't you say?"

Vand flicked his wrist again and an invisible force once again shoved Marak backwards. His body struck the table as he flew across the room. With a bone-jarring thud, Marak and the table hit the wall. The legs of the table splintered from the impact as Marak was again held flat against the wall above the floor. A searing pain shot through his back, and he could feel the table between him and the wall. The three chairs smashed into Marak's legs and splintered from the impact. The Torak howled in pain.

Vand released the spell and Marak tumbled to the floor along with the wooden debris from the crushed chairs and table legs. The room suddenly roared and shook violently. As Lyra watched, a great fissure opened up in the floor between her and Vand. On one side of the fissure were Vand and Rejji. Across the chasm, Marak and Lyra stared in awe at Vand.

"Feel free to throw your body into the crevice, Torak," laughed Vand. "I guarantee it will be the easiest way out for you."

Marak groaned with pain, but he rose unsteadily and picked up a piece of a smashed table leg. He walked slowly towards the fissure and tossed the piece of wood into it. The mangled table leg dropped soundlessly into the blackness. Marak frowned as he had expected another illusion or at least to see the lower levels of the temple, but there was nothing but darkness within the crevice.

All this time, Rejji stood motionless, trying to figure out why he was chosen to be in a battle with three powerful people. If Marak's strength and agility could not best Vand, and Lyra's magic had no effect, what could he possibly do? The absurdity of his being in the throne room at that moment hit the Astor hard. He looked over at Marak, who appeared to be in great pain, and then at Lyra standing erect within her blue cylinder. He knew that she could not cast out of the safety that the cylinder provided her, so her magic was useless. He shook his head in exasperation.

"What am I supposed to do here?" he shouted to Marak.

Vand laughed and turned his gaze on the Astor. "You are supposed to watch your friends die," he responded. "When they are defeated, I will offer you power greater than anything you could possibly imagine. For now, all you have to do is stand and observe."

"I will never serve you," Rejji blurted out, "nor will I stand idly by and watch Lyra and Marak be killed."

Vand's face instantly turned dark as he glared at the Astor. His arms trembled with rage, and he pointed one lone finger at Rejji.

"Move!" shouted Marak.

Rejji dove to the floor and rolled into a ball as Marak had taught him. A large explosion rocked the room as stone tiles shattered, and bits of stone sprayed in every direction. Where Rejji had stood not a moment before, there was a large crater in the tile floor, and dust hanging in the air. Rejji stared at the crater and then locked eyes with Vand. The disciple of Dobuk appeared to be composing himself, and he purposely looked away from the Astor.

Marak frowned at Vand's actions. The Motangan Emperor appeared to have lost control for a moment, but more importantly, he showed that he did not intend to kill Rejji. The Torak turned and slowly walked back towards Lyra until he stood alongside the Star of Sakova.

"What is going on?" Lyra whispered to Marak.

"I am not sure," admitted the Torak, "but we have just seen a clue into how to defeat Vand. Now we must understand what it is that we saw."

Rejji exhaled slowly while Vand still pointedly avoided looking at him. The Astor walked cautiously across the floor and stood directly in front of Vand. He dropped to one knee and bowed his head slightly.

"Forgive me, Emperor," Rejji said loud enough for all to hear. "Perhaps I spoke with haste."

Vand turned his head and stared at the Astor. Slowly the hard, cruel features of his rage faded and he nodded slightly.

"Excellent," smiled Vand. "I have great things in store for you, but first you must lead me to Angragar. Let me dispose of these two, and we can be on our way."

"But what about the armies outside?" balked Rejji.

"They are of no concern," shrugged Dobuk's disciple. "I can destroy them as easily as raising the dead of Vandegar."

Rejji smiled at the Emperor and nodded his head. "You will like Angragar," he said with a grin. "The library there is fantastic. You can't believe all of the things we read there, and how important they are."

"What are you talking about?" frowned Vand. "I used to live in Angragar. I know the city well. There is nothing there that I have not read."

"Perhaps it is my vanity that confuses you," shrugged Rejji, "but I thought if I told you how wonderful Angragar is, you would not reject me."

"Stop mumbling nonsense," Vand waved the Astor away. "Wait to one side while I dispose of the Torak and the Star of Sakova. Then we shall leave."

Rejji moved away from the throne while Marak leaned closer to Lyra.

“That’s it!” he exclaimed softly.

“What?” Lyra asked with a puzzled frown.

“Remember the tomes we read about the early days of Vand in Angragar?” the Torak asked. “Vand steadily grew worse as if he had a mental illness. I remember remarking at the time that his vanity would be his undoing.”

“And he cannot stand rejection,” Lyra nodded vigorously. “Let me handle this. Move away.”

As Marak walked away, the blue cylinder surrounding the Star of Sakova disappeared. Vand noticed the spell dropping and turned his curious gaze towards Lyra.

“Even if you defeat us,” Lyra said loudly, “you will not be permitted to enter Angragar.”

“What are you talking about?” spat Vand. “Angragar is my birthright. If you think Kaltara can stop me from possessing the city, you are deranged.”

“Kaltara has put me in your way,” smiled Lyra. “Before you can leave here, you must defeat me.”

“A small task for my powers,” shrugged Vand, “and a situation I have already planned for.”

“I am sure that you have,” nodded Lyra, “but even then you cannot enter Angragar.”

“Preposterous,” spat Vand. “Who is going to stop me?”

“Dobuk will stop you,” smiled the Star of Sakova.

“I am Dobuk’s disciple,” scowled Vand. “You are speaking nonsense.”

“You have been Dobuk’s disciple,” corrected Lyra, “but that time is over now. The Great Demon will choose a new disciple. You have greatly disappointed Dobuk, just like you have disappointed everyone who has ever known you.”

“I have had millions of followers,” Vand shouted, his fists curling in anger.

“And every one of them hated you,” retorted Lyra. “Every one of them rejected you. They all knew that Dobuk had made a mistake in choosing you, just as Kaltara had made a mistake in choosing you before that. You are a failure, Vand. You are unloved, unaccepted, and feeble.”

Vand’s face contorted in rage, and it was obvious that he would soon strike out at someone. Lyra knew that their only chance of survival rested in directing Vand’s anger towards herself.

“You are so feeble that you cannot even best a young woman like myself,” taunted Lyra. “You are afraid to drop your shield as I have done, because you know that you are a failure and would lose to my superior power.”

Vand's move was swift when it came. Both of his hands streaked out before him and pointed at Lyra. The young Star of Sakova stood motionless as she stared at Vand. For a long moment the two opposing mages appeared to be frozen in position. Marak stared at Lyra's face. Her eyes were glassy, and she showed no notice of his presence.

"What is going on?" shouted Rejji from across the room. "Vand looks like he is frozen."

"Lyra is using an ancient Sakovan spell," explained the Torak. "It is a contest of raw power. Neither can react to anything while they duel, and the loser will die."

"But what if Vand has the greater power?" questioned the Astor.

Marak stood speechless for a moment as he recalled the story of Lyra's battle with her father right after she had become the Star of Sakova. She had greater power than Master Malafar, and her father's life was only saved by Goral smashing a chair over his head. As Marak watched, he saw Lyra's face begin to contort with pain, just as Master Malafar's had.

"What does Vand's face look like?" shouted Marak.

"He looks angry," answered the Astor, "just like he did when he tried to kill me."

"No contortions?" Marak asked frantically.

"No," Rejji shook his head.

"Use your staff to kill him," urged the Torak.

Rejji dashed across the room and swung his staff at Vand's head. The staff rebounded off of the invisible shield surround Dobuk's disciple.

"He is still shielded," yelled Rejji.

"Still shielded?" echoed Marak. "Yet he still has the power to destroy her?"

"Perhaps your sword would work better," Rejji suggested.

Marak stared at the fissure in the floor. He wondered if he could possibly leap over it without falling in. Knowing that a fall into the crevice would mean certain death for all three of them, Marak abandoned the idea and paced nervously. Suddenly, he stopped pacing and stared at the long table that had been set up when they entered the throne room. Sheathing his sword, Marak dragged the table to the edge of the precipice. He grunted with effort as he struggled to stand the table on one of its short edges.

"Hurry," shouted Rejji.

Marak gasped with exertion as he maneuvered the table into position and pushed it forward. The table fell to the floor creating a bridge over the crevice. The Torak raced across the bridge, avoiding the spot where the demon's acidic spittle had eaten a hole in it. He unsheathed his sword as he skidded to halt next to the throne. With

all his might, Marak swung the Sword of Torak at the Emperor's head. The sword slammed into the invisible shield, and the vibration of the impact was so severe that Marak dropped the sword.

"It won't work," seethed Marak.

"Why won't it work?" frowned Rejji. "Kaltara would not have let us come this far without providing what we need."

"Well I wish he would tell us," shouted Marak as he raced back to check on Lyra.

He stared at Lyra and saw her face grossly distorted. Her limbs were shaking violently and Marak swallowed hard. As he lowered his head in frustration, his eyes landed on the Rapier of the Star. His eyes widened and grabbed Lyra's sword. With a sword in each hand, the Torak raced over the crevice again and slid to a halt next to Rejji.

"We are the Three," Marak declared with a sword in each hand. "Kaltara has given us everything we need. Join me in attacking this fiend."

As the three weapons from Kaltara approached Vand, it became clear that the shield could not stop them. Marak handed the rapier to Rejji and gripped the Sword of Torak with both hands.

"Just prick him," ordered the Torak.

Rejji shoved the staff and rapier into Vand's side, blood oozing from the rapier's puncture. Marak spread his legs wide and swung as hard as he could. As the Sword of Torak sliced through the Vand's neck, his head flew through the air and rolled along the floor. Vand's body tilted forward and toppled from the throne. Across the room, Lyra collapsed to the floor. Marak dropped his weapon and raced across the bridge and knelt at her side. Lyra's body trembled. Her limbs twitched, and her eyes stared blankly at the ceiling. Marak lifted her head and tried to hold her, but her body was wracked with spasms.

"She needs help," shouted Marak.

"I am right beside you," Rejji said softly. "I will go find some healers."

"How?" Marak gazed up in confusion.

"The doors are back," pointed Rejji. "Stay calm. I will be right back."

Tears flowed from Marak's eyes as he cradled Lyra's body and rocked back and forth. He knew enough magic to heal a wound, but he could not comprehend what was happening to Lyra's body. He felt useless.

* * *

"The door won't open," scowled Xavo as he stood with Princess Alastasia and Lady Mystic outside the door leading to Dobuk's domain.

“Stand aside,” ordered Lady Mystic.

Xavo glanced at his partner and nodded as he moved to one side of the doorway. Lady Mystic extended both fists towards the door. The air shimmered for an instant as the magical projectile slammed into the door, but nothing changed. Lady Mystic tried again, but to no avail. The door would not budge.

“It has been a long time since the doors to the throne room disappeared,” sighed Xavo. “Lyra will be dead by the time we reach Dobuk. She might already be dead for all we know.”

“I don’t know what else to try,” Lady Mystic said defensively. “We have tried brawn, and we have tried magic. I do not know what else to do. If we do not distract Dobuk, all is lost. There is no mage alive who is stronger than my father.”

Princess Alastasia frowned at Lady Mystic. While her words may have been true, it was not helping the situation for Xavo to hear them.

“Let me try,” the elven princess said.

Lady Mystic shrugged and shook her head as if the suggestion was ludicrous, but she moved away. Xavo looked curiously at the elf.

“What can you do, MistyTrail?” asked Xavo. “I thought elven magic was mostly healing?”

“Elven magic focuses on life forms of all kinds,” explained Princess Alastasia, “even dead and dormant life forms.”

“Necromancy?” frowned Xavo.

“Not exactly,” the elf shook her head. “Although the magic in theory would work on higher life forms, I am hoping to manipulate the wood in the door. If I can control it, I can cause the door to open a hole for us to pass through.”

“Try it,” Xavo urged. “Nothing else seems to work.”

Princess Alastasia moved close to the door to Dobuk’s chamber. She placed her right hand flat against the door and felt the wood.

“The door is ancient,” the elven princess remarked.

As she placed her left hand on the door to begin her casting, the door suddenly swung open. A look of surprise came over her face as she turned and stared at Xavo. Lyra’s father’s eyes brightened immediately. He pushed the elf aside and burst into the room ready to strike the moment his eyes landed on the Great Demon. Lady Mystic hurried in behind him, but Princess Alastasia remained outside as they had agreed.

After several minutes of silence, Princess Alastasia peeked around the corner of the doorway. She saw Xavo and Lady Mystic standing still. They were staring at the plain walls of a very small room.

“We spent all this time on the wrong door?” she asked as she entered behind Xavo and Lady Mystic.

“This is not the wrong room,” Lady Mystic shook her head in

confusion. “This is where Dobuk resides.”

“Or did,” corrected Xavo. “It is clear that he resides here no longer.”

A distant cry for help split the silence of the empty room. Princess Alastasia cocked her ears and listened. Another cry was heard and she clutched Xavo’s arm in excitement.

“That is Rejji’s voice!” exclaimed the elven Princess. “He must be outside of the throne room for us to hear him.”

The three mages turned and raced out of the room.

Chapter 51

All is Relative

Princess Alastasia raced along the corridor with Lady Mystic and Xavo falling behind. The young elf rounded the corner and saw Rejji leaning over the railing and shouting for help from those below.

"You are alive!" exclaimed the elven princess as she slid to a halt. "What is the matter?"

"It is Lyra," the Astor responded anxiously as Lady Mystic and Xavo rounded the corner. "She is hurt, and Marak doesn't know what to do."

Princess Alastasia turned and ran into the throne room with the rest of the group right behind her. She saw Marak cradling Lyra and crying. She rushed to his side and saw Lyra shaking uncontrollably.

"What happened?" she asked.

"She used that ancient Sakovan spell," answered Marak. "I fear that Vand was stronger than her. I don't know what to do for her."

"The spell she used on me?" Xavo asked as he looked across the room and saw Vand's corpse.

"Yes," nodded Marak. "She used it to immobilize Vand so that Rejji and I could attack him. Her magic was no good against him."

"Clever," Lady Mystic nodded appreciatively as her eyes drifted towards her father's head. Her face clearly showed the shock of loss, but there were no tears in her eyes. "It is finally done then."

"Someone go outside and summon Avalar," instructed Princess Alastasia as she eased Lyra away from the Torak. "I will do what I can while we wait for him."

Xavo nodded and immediately hurried out of the room. He stood by the railing over the atrium and wove an air tunnel to the lower levels.

"The Star of Sakova is wounded on the top level," Xavo announced as he moved the air tunnel around the building. "We need healers immediately, especially King Avalar."

Lyra's father repeated the message several times and was rewarded with shouts from below. He watched as elves and Chula shamans scurried up the stairs towards the vine ladder that the elven princess had created. Xavo felt a presence near him and turned to see Lady Mystic standing beside him.

"That is why Dobuk was gone when we entered the room," she said softly. "With Vand dead, there was nothing for him to stay

around for."

"He will reappear somewhere with another stooge," frowned Xavo. "The world should not have to go through this again."

"You know," Lady Mystic smiled, "a short while ago I would have said it was inevitable, but now I am not so sure."

"What do you mean?" squinted Xavo.

"I have always seen our mission as a form of suicide," confessed Lady Mystic. "I was willing to die with you to save your daughter's life because I love you and I would not want to live without you."

"It was a suicide mission," Xavo responded, his voicing showing confusion as to what his lover was trying to say.

"It was indeed," Lady Mystic continued, "but it doesn't have to be that way any more. I thought Vand was indestructible, but your daughter and her friends proved differently."

"I do not understand what you are saying," frowned Xavo. "Of course it is no longer a suicide mission. Vand is dead. It is over."

"Is it?" questioned Lady Mystic. "You just said that Dobuk will find another fool and try to confront Kaltara once again. That means this is not over."

"Are you suggesting that we try to find Dobuk and defeat him?" inquired Xavo. "You must be mad. He could be anywhere in the world. He could possess someone else tomorrow, and we would never know."

"And he is invincible," Lady Mystic nodded with a smile. "I know all that, but I no longer believe that he cannot be beaten."

"You are serious," gasped Xavo. "It would take the rest of our lives just to find the Great Demon."

"Do you have something better in mind?" grinned Vand's daughter. "We would be together for the rest of our lives and see places that no man has ever seen before."

"You have a point," Xavo nodded thoughtfully. "As long as I know that Lyra will be alright, there is really nothing else to keep us here. Neither one of us would fit in very well in any of the countries that we know of, but I think your thoughts about actually killing Dobuk are mere fantasy."

"Are they?" retorted Lady Mystic. "I have seen Kaltara perform miracles in this last year. I have to believe that He would aid us in our mission. In any event, we will never know if we do not try. Are you up for a new challenge?"

"You are the only challenge that I need," chuckled Xavo as elven mages started rushing into the throne room, "but yes, I am up for a new challenge. Let's make sure that Lyra will survive and then we can quietly slip away from all of this."

* * *

Marak and Lyra sat on the steps outside the front doors of the temple. Thousands of campfires lit up the night sky, but the Torak eyes were glued to the one he loved.

"How are you feeling?" Marak asked softly.

"Marak," the Star of Sakova sighed with mild exasperation, "you have been asking me that every few minutes. My answer will not change. I am feeling fine."

"But you said that you felt weak," frowned the Torak.

"I am weak," chuckled Lyra. "I will probably feel weak for some time, but I am fully healed. There is nothing wrong with me. I just need some rest."

"Maybe I should find a tent for you to lie down in," mused Marak.

"The tyriks are done removing the webs," announced Rejji as he strode in from the darkness. "It seems the skeletons all collapsed suddenly while we were in the throne room. I am having the bones buried deeply just in case."

"That was probably the moment of Vand's death," Lyra responded. "He controlled the skeletons, and without his will supporting them, they could no longer exist. Hopefully they will stay buried forever now."

"I hope so," nodded the Astor as he turned to leave. "I will leave the two of you alone."

"Wait," Lyra said quickly. "Why don't you bring the Torak up to speed on how our armies made out in the battle? I think he needs to get his mind onto other things."

Marak looked hurt and confused, but Rejji chuckled and nodded.

"Our losses were severe," he reported, as his face grew serious. "The Jiadin suffered the worst. They lost about half of their men, but there is a bright spot in their loss. The free tribes admired the courage of their Jiadin brothers, and I suspect that there will no longer be a division within Fakara. The Jiadin proved to be true brothers when they were needed. All of the tribes will work together to rebuild this country."

Several sets of feet approached as the Three spoke on the steps of the temple. Marak looked up and saw many familiar faces, faces he had hoped that he would see again after the battle was over.

"How did the Khadorans do?" the Torak asked Lord Chenowith.

"Not too bad," shrugged the member of the Lords' Council. "I am disheartened to report that the Aritor clan is but a remnant of its former glory. Lord Faliman died in the initial attack and most of his clan died with him. We will need to elect a new member to the Lords' Council. The other clans had heavy losses as well, but not nearly as bad as we had feared. Khadora will survive. A lot of good men died to rid this world of Vand, but he is gone and we are not. All in all, that is

a satisfactory result."

"It is," Marak sighed with sadness. "Lord Chenowith, I want the Lords' Council to select another Emperor of Khadora. If they were interested in my views, I would propose that you replace me. Your father served Khadora well, and I see him and much more in you."

"We have no need for a new emperor," balked Lord Chenowith. "You have started us down a path that should have been taken centuries ago. We are not ready to relinquish that task. The Lords' Council will not accept your resignation."

"I have other plans," Marak said curtly.

Lyra and Rejji stared at Marak in confusion, but the Torak's eyes fixed on Rejji with a look of determination.

"Will you marry us?" Marak asked Rejji. "You are Kaltara's Astor and someone that I am proud to call a friend."

"Marak!" exclaimed Lyra. "Couldn't you at least ask me first?"

"But I thought…" Marak said haltingly. "Don't you want to marry me?"

"Was that a proposal?" Lyra asked seriously.

Marak shook his head in confusion, but he quickly nodded, "Yes. Will you marry me?"

"Let me think about it," Lyra said as if considering some serious dilemma.

Marak stood wide-eyed and horrified that her answer might be negative, but Rejji started laughingly hysterically, and Lyra could no longer maintain a straight face. She started laughing, and Marak knew he was being toyed with.

"I will take that as a yes," chuckled Marak. "Will you do it, Rejji?"

"I would be honored," Rejji replied, trying hard to control his laughter.

"It need not be anything elaborate," continued the Torak. "Just a simple ceremony and then we are going to leave for some place quiet and far removed from this destruction. I hope you understand," he continued as he turned to face Lord Chenowith. "I need to be far away from all of the responsibilities of leading Khadora. We need time alone in peace."

"What about the Sakova?" asked Lyra. "I cannot just leave them. They have waited for a thousand years for their Star. They would never allow it."

"I think they can manage while you are gone," offered Temiker. "There is not likely to be any crisis other than integrating the Motangan soldiers who have decided to stay in the Sakova. Your people can handle that."

"And the rebuilding of Alamar," added StarWind, "but Temiker is correct. We now understand why you were sent to us when you were,

Lyra. You have done more than anyone had a right to expect. Go with your husband and find peace somewhere. We will be fine until you come back."

"The same is true of Khadora," offered Lord Chenowith. "There is no need for resignations. The Lords' Council will carry on while you are gone."

"You do not understand," Marak shook his head. "We may never come back. You must choose my successor. Khadora must have an emperor."

"Why must they have an emperor?" asked King Avalar. "You have taught the Lords' Council how to work together, and you have introduced them all to Kaltara. Lyra has made peace with the Omungans, and the Fakarans have united. All of your countries still have access to Kaltara's Astor if the need arises, and the humans now have the elves as friends and trading partners again. Go off and discover each other in peace. If and when you return, your people will stand ready to welcome you back."

"Well said," agreed StarWind. "We can manage with Kaltara's help, and if the need arises, there are still air tunnels."

"It is settled then," smiled Rejji. "Let's gather thousands of your followers and have that little celebration you asked for."

"In the morning," smiled Marak as he rose and helped Lyra to her feet. "For now a walk in the dark will have to suffice."

"Where are we going?" asked the Star of Sakova as they moved away from the crowd at the front of the temple.

"I don't know for sure," pondered Marak. "I just want some place where we can be alone without people constantly coming to us for answers to questions we would rather not hear."

"You seem to be taking me someplace certain," replied Lyra. "I know that forceful step of yours."

"Oh," laughed Marak, "you mean where are we going right now? We are going to the one creature that can take us to places we have never been before. Where she takes us will be a mystery."

"Myka?" Lyra brightened. "I could not think of a better way to travel."

The Torak led Lyra around the side of the temple to where Myka was resting. They found the dragon napping, and Marak playfully slapped Myka's snout. Smoke curled from the dragon's nostrils and one of Myka's eyes opened. It promptly closed again.

"Not much of a greeting," Marak scowled humorously. "Wake up. We have a favor to ask of you."

"Talk to me tomorrow," grumbled the dragon.

Marak thought Myka was being playful and prepared to deliver a suitable retort, but Lyra gripped his hand in warning.

“What is the matter, Myka?” Lyra asked. “Are you wounded?”

“Bah,” snorted the dragon. “There was nothing here to wound me. I just do not feel well.”

“What hurts?” questioned the Star of Sakova.

When the dragon did not answer, Lyra turned to Marak and whispered, “Go get Avalar.”

While Marak was off searching for the elven king, Lyra settled down next to the dragon and leaned against her. She listened to the strange rumblings emanating from the dragon.

“There is a great deal of noise within you for someone who is supposed to be sleeping,” Lyra remarked.

“I have not eaten today,” Myka replied curtly. “I wonder if the Fakarans would miss a few horses?”

Marak rounded the corned of the temple with King Avalar running alongside him. Lyra rose and moved away from the dragon to greet them.

“What is wrong with her?” King Avalar asked.

“I do not know,” admitted Lyra, “but she sounds very weak. I think she may have overexerted herself, and she mentioned that she had not eaten.”

“I will check her,” promised the elven king.

“There is something else,” Lyra said as her hand tugged on Avalar’s arm to prevent him from leaving. “Do you remember when we healed her after her bout with the demons?”

“I will never forget it,” nodded King Avalar.

“When we thought she had died,” explained Lyra, “I thought I heard four hearts within her. We finally determined that her heartbeat was so weak that we were probably hearing echoes, but those extra beats are stronger now, and there are five of them. I fear something is going terribly wrong inside her. I do not think we fully healed her the last time.”

“Let me check her,” King Avalar said as he pulled away from Lyra.

The elven king moved to the dragon and cast a general healing spell on her. While he cast his magic, he placed his ear to her scales and listened intently. After an hour of healing the dragon opened her eyes and reported feeling somewhat better, but the elven king was not convinced.

“Go get her some food,” ordered Avalar as he returned to where Marak and Lyra were standing.

Marak nodded and ran away while Avalar moved away from Lyra and wove an air tunnel to Elvangar. The Torak returned with two Fakaran horses, but the dragon was not interested in them. Myka closed her eyes again and tried to sleep. King Avalar finished his

conversation with Elvangar and approached the dragon. He spoke softly to her, and Myka's eyes suddenly opened fully. Her head turned towards the King of Elvangar and stared at him. Avalar gently patted the dragon's snout and walked away.

"You two should go to bed," King Avalar said as he reached Marak and Lyra. "You have a big day tomorrow."

"What about Myka?" Marak asked with concern.

"She will be fine," assured the elven king. "Do not worry about her."

Without further words, the elven king walked off. Marak stared at his winged warrior for a moment and shook his head. While Avalar's words were comforting, fear for Myka filled his heart. He led Lyra towards the temple where rooms had been set aside for them.

* * *

The wedding ceremony was indeed simple, but thousands of guests attended. The cheers of congratulations reverberated across the land, but Marak was only concerned about the feelings of two special friends. Lyra's face was aglow with joy, and Myka grinned broadly with short spouts of flame occasionally escaping with her joyful laughter.

Marak helped Lyra onto the dragon's back, and Myka leaped into the air. She sped around the huge encampment below several times before turning and heading off to the southeast.

"I see you are feeling better today," smiled Marak. "Did you finally eat those horses?"

"Those two and more," cackled Myka. "My appetite returned with a vengeance. I hope the Fakarans will not be too angry."

"They will get over it," laughed Lyra. "What was wrong with you? Was Avalar able to help?"

"There is nothing that Avalar could do for me," replied the winged warrior, "except tell me what Garl had discovered in the archives in Elvangar. How was I to know?"

"Know what?" Marak asked with confusion.

"That I am going to be a mother," Myka said proudly. "No longer will I be the last of the dragons."

"I do not understand," admitted the Star of Sakova. "If you are the last of the dragons, how is that possible?"

"With Kaltara," beamed Myka, "all is possible. I shall have one child for each demon I destroyed."

"Then those heartbeats were not yours," Lyra nodded with understanding, "and that is why there was an extra one yesterday. You killed another demon."

"Congratulations," grinned Marak. "I am so happy for you."

"Happy?" retorted the dragon. "I should dump your body in the

sea and just take Lyra someplace nice."

"What?" balked the Torak.

"You cost me two children," replied Myka. "You had to use that fancy sword of yours to slay my demons."

Marak was mortified with Myka's verbal response, but he caught the dragon winking at Lyra, and the Star of Sakova tried to cover up her laughter, but she was not very successful.

"I am surprised that you were even able to get four by yourself," quipped Marak. "By all rights, the children should have to consider me their father. Without my urging you would never have come out of your cave, and the demons would still be around. I probably would have had to kill them all myself."

"Kaltara is their father," Myka shouted with joy as she folded in her wings and dove for the sea, "but you two can be their aunt and uncle."

The dragon flared her wings and skimmed over the waves of the sea. Moments later she soared high in the sky and dove towards the sea once more. Marak and Lyra clung on as the dragon flitted around in ecstasy. As the three servants of Kaltara passed over the Island of Darkness on their way to a strange and foreign land, a keen observer would have seen the dragon zigzagging through the sky, but she was far too high for anyone to hear her ecstatic words.

"I am going to be a mother!"